BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

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STAR WESTERN

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by DAN KIRBY

BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST
SEPT. 1954
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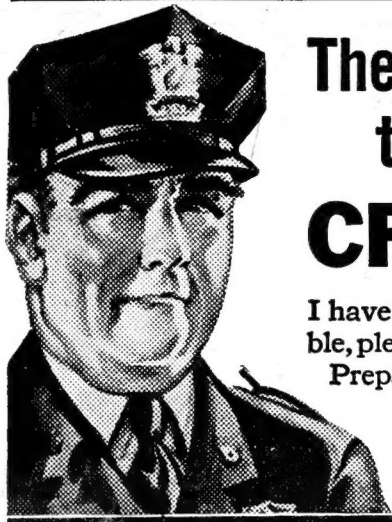

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by Arthur Godfrey

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BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 55 SEPTEMBER, 1954 NUMBER 2

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Surely this woman belonged in Hell. But the Devil is a man—and he'd think twice before he'd let her in!

LAIR OF THE LOST.....*Dan Kirby* **40**
A slip of a girl taught that uncurried town that even the bravest man is afraid of something....

QUEEN OF HIDDEN VALLEY.....*Gordon D. Shirreffs* **52**
It would mean bloodshed to get the settlers out of that deadly valley. Maybe the blood of a young and lovely girl....

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Southern-bred Lynn DeLacey would dare anything to stab a Yankee soldier in the back—even bloody Apache break-out!

★ ★ **Gripping Western Short Stories** ★ ★

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The highest degree they gave at Windmill School was a BBE—Bachelor of Black Eyes!

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BEWARE DEATH'S SPRINGS!

By
J. Eugene Chrisman

"*LOS muertos no hablan,*" the Mexicans will tell you in awed half-whispers if you mention the bandit loot and dead men at Los Muertos Springs. "The dead cannot talk, señor, and if the gold and silver are there, as they say it is, it is better left alone for there was a curse placed upon it long ago."

Los Muertos Springs lie close to the Mexican border in Davis County, Texas. Valentine is the nearest town. In the 1850's the country around it was mostly unsettled and inhospitable for honest men who did not visit it unless they had business there. Juan Estrada, the notorious Mexican bandit had business of a kind there when he and his band of choice border cut-throats were killed there after helping bury a fortune in gold and silver, religious objects and precious stones. "*Los muertos no hablan.*"

Juan Estrada and his *malo hombres* were the terror of the Big Bend country in those early days. Dressed as Indians they robbed, killed, raped and burned almost at will for there was little or no law in the Big Bend then and salty old Milt Favor who had a large ranch and a hundred and fifty vaqueros at his command could not cope with them.

It was in 1854 that the United States army came into the Big Bend country to build a fort in the Davis Mountains which they later abandoned. It was reestablished after the Civil War had ended and in 1878 a detachment consisting of ninety-nine colored soldiers under the command of a white lieutenant rode out to the Van Horn Valley to cut hay for the cavalry horses at the fort.

At about the same time four outlaws, all wicked, all desperate and all Americans arrived on the scene. Their names were Doctor Neal, Red Curley, Zwing Hunt and Jim Hughes. They had been mixed up in the famous Lincoln County cattle war and had rustled cattle in Mexico with John Ringo. They were all hardcases and they came to the Big Bend country with a desperate but workable plan. The plan was for them to join forces with Juan Estrada, steal a large quantity of government mules, wagons and supplies and then loot the Mexican government's mint at Monterrey.

Estrada quickly accepted their plan so that they had only need of the mules, wagons and supplies. They obtained these by simply shooting down all but one of the ninety-nine colored soldiers and their white lieutenant and helping themselves to the mules, wagons and supplies. This done they headed for Mexico and the San Antonio Mountains where they loaded the wagon with the guano which was to be found in great quantities in the bat caves. This enabled them to pose as honest traders when they reached Monterrey.

AFTER selling the guano they made camp just out of town and prepared for the next move. Aware that no Mexican soldier could resist free tequila and a game of monte they saw to it that it was told around town that soldiers could find both at their camp. It was not long until the soldiers guarding the mint heard the story and went to investigate. They found not free tequila and monte but sudden vio-

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

lent death at the hands of the bandits who killed to the last man.

Meanwhile a part of the gang raided the mint, sacked the smelter and looted the cathedral of its precious religious objects. These they loaded into their wagons and later transferred them to the backs of twenty five of their stolen mules and began their three hundred and ninety mile journey to the Davis Mountains. Knowing that pursuit would soon be organized they drove the mules to the limit of their endurance day and night.

And they had need of speed for no sooner had the news of their depredation reached Monoclava than a company of Mexican cavalry set out in hot pursuit. Juan Estrada, wise in the ways of Mexican soldiers, knew that the cavalry would expect them to cross the Rio Grande at the Presidio del Norte and would be waiting for them there. In anticipation of this he led the party across at the mouth of Reagan Canyon, almost two hundred miles below where the cavalry waited. The troopers lost a full week.

But if Estrada had surprised the Mexican cavalry an even greater surprise awaited him and his men for as they rode into the pass leading to Los Muertos Springs, their four white companions opened fire on them and killed all but one Mexican who had been riding a mule and so escaped.

With a treasure since estimated at $800,000 in their possession the Americans lost no time in hiding it as they realized that the pursuit was far from ended. They placed it in a twelve foot hole in front of the mouth of the cave, after taking what they figured they'd need for spending money, and planted shrubs in the earth with which they had filled the hole. Then they retreated to a remote valley where they rested their tired horses and themselves while they planned further deviltry.

Yearning for drink and recreation the four filled their saddle bags with gold coin and headed for El Paso where they spent money freely on a week's debauch. They next showed up in Arizona and New Mexico in different places in both states and in each of those places they drank, gambled and wenched.

They must have needed money for in the spring of 1881 they held up a train near Tombstone and escaped with a sum so large that the express company would not reveal the exact amount. During the robbery they killed the mail clerk and so added another black mark to their already black record. Needing transportation for their loot they killed a man who was driving a team and wagon along the trail, loaded their gold into the wagon and departed for Los Muertos Springs.

ARRIVING at the Springs they found their loot undisturbed but they had more money then to add to it so they decided to make a more secure hiding place for it. Finding four Mexicans tunneling into a nearby mountain in search of gold, they forced them to return to the bandit camp with them. In a carefully selected spot they ordered the Mexicans to dig a hole eighty five feet deep and to then tunnel back eighteen feet under a shelving rock and there dig out a place large enough to hold all the treasure. In another smaller hole, at some distance from the large excavation, they buried a quantity of precious stones taken from the Monterrey cathedral. Obviously they expected to use these stones to bring in cash.

At last the hole was finished and the treasure transferred. Then the bandits did an inexplicable thing which has never been satisfactorily explained. They forced the Mexicans to mix the blood of antelopes they killed with granite gravel into a sort of cement much harder than steel and to seal the hole with it. They must certainly

(Continued on page 10)

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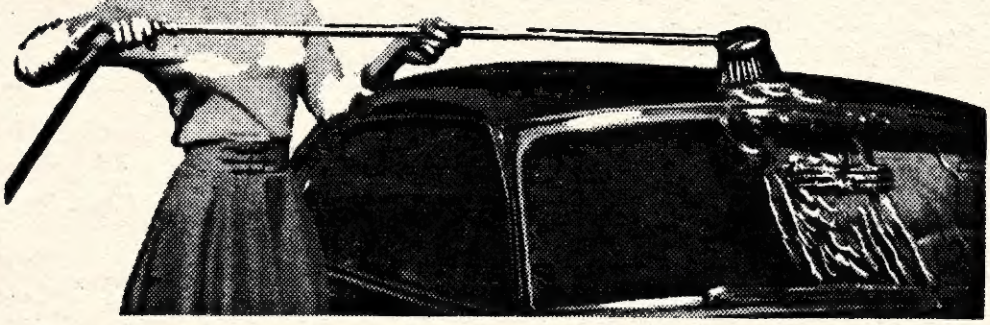

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(Continued from page 8)

have expected to return some time for the horde but they certainly left no easy task for themselves if they did intend to reopen that hole for nothing less than a large charge of dynamite would blow it.

The four Mexicans were shot and killed as soon as the hole had been sealed. Again it was *"los muertos no hablan."*

The possession of such a vast amount of money proved the nemesis of the four desperadoes. While on a drunken spree in Silver City one of them shot and killed a young man who had refused to drink with them. Aroused at last the citizens of Arizona, Texas and New Mexico offered a large reward for the four, dead or alive, and several large posses were organized to run them down.

Retribution caught up with Doctor Neal first. He was caught in camp and mortally wounded. Zwing Hunt was shot, captured and taken to the Tombstone jail. He later escaped from the jail hospital where he was having his wounds treated only to be killed by a band of roving Apaches a week later near Yuma. The Law And Order League caught up with Red Curley and Jim Hughes in the town of Shakespeare. There being no trees handy the two were hanged just as dead from the rafters of the dining room of the Pioneer House which served dinner as usual that same night.

The end of the outlaw gang had come ten years before any search for their hidden loot was made. It came when a New Mexico sheep raiser named Stevens suddenly appeared at the old outlaw camp at Silver City in search of evidence pertaining to the gold and silver from Monterrey. Searching the long deserted camp he came upon a rock slab buried shallowly beside the tumbledown shack. In it were a few mouldy letters written by Jim Hughes to his mother and a map of the Los Muertos Springs cache.

This map later turned up as a possession of a man named Bill Cole who was familiar with the topography of the land around the Springs. Cole set about identifying points mentioned on the map and identified thirteen of them. By this he also located the exact spot where the second hole had been dug.

Elated, Cole began to dig and he had not gone down three feet until he knew he was on the right track. At a depth of ten feet he came upon a layer of the special cement in which the long-dried antelope blood was still strong enough to draw swarms of flies to the spot. Still farther down he found rotted fragments of the antelope skin bags with which the Mexican diggers had brought dirt to the surface. At last he reached the point from which the tunnel branched off to the treasure!

He realized instantly that he would not be able to dig out the eighteen foot long tunnel with the few inadequate tools he had. He had no money but he was too close to the treasure to quit. He tried in vain to raise money among the few friends he had but they laughed at his idea that he was close to $800,000 and told him that the idea was prepostrous. At last he found a doctor willing to chance it.

This time it was water, first seeping in and then coming in torrents, that stopped him. He tried in every way he knew to overcome this new obstacle but failed.

The treasure? It is still there, as far as anyone knows, if indeed it was ever there at all. Many will tell you that the entire story is a fabrication, just another of the countless, baseless lost treasure legends. Bill Cole believes it to still be there but no one shares his belief strongly enough to advance him the money to go on trying. So the question of the bandit loot and dead men at Los Muertos Springs stands today. Ask any of the Mexicans in the vicinity. They will shrug their shoulders with characteristic Latin eloquence and say, *"Quen sabe? Los muertos no hablan, señor."*

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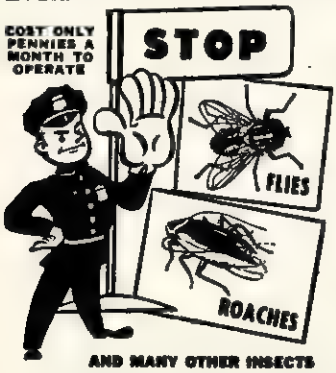

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KING OF THE WAGON

By

Herb Baden

ROUNDUP cooks occupied a unique position in the West. They were creatures of privilege in their own domain and ruled the chuckwagon with the unquestioned authority of a born monarch.

The cowhands had a saying: "Only a fool argues with a skunk, a mule, or a cook." The wagon was both the emblem of a cook's authority and the source of all his power. Nobody gave him orders—not even the boss—and all "suggestions" were put forward with the utmost discretion and diplomacy.

A cowboy might call the cook a "gut robber" or "grub worm" or "pot rustler" to his face, but he did not dare suggest that the job might be done better. Nor did he venture to touch anything in the chuckwagon without the cook's permission.

The story is told of a foreman who came in late to supper on the cook's first day. This particular cook was a scrawny little runt who weighed about eighty pounds less than the foreman and looked so puny that everybody felt sorry for him.

The rest of the outfit had finished eating, and the foreman found a skillet of food and a pot of coffee sitting by the fire, which had died down. Then the foreman made the mistake of remarking within earshot of the cook that the food was not warm. The little cook flew into a rage, hit him with the pot and skillet, and drove him out of camp with a string of curses that almost took his hide off. He rode away swearing to come back and kill the cook, but changed his mind later.

After all, cooks were hard to get. They commanded higher wages than the cowpunchers for this reason and were always in short supply. Usually the cook was an older man whose riding days had passed but who still wanted the life on the range. This was not always so, of course, but these seem to be the men who created the tradition of the cook and his phenomenal temper.

Bilious Bill, Vinegar Jim and Cold Bread Joe are some of the names still remembered. The latter gained his name because he cooked biscuits in vast quantities. His supply lasted for days on end, and as the biscuits grew older the men ate fewer of them—thus saving Cold Bread Joe the work of preparing a new batch.

(Continued on page 14)

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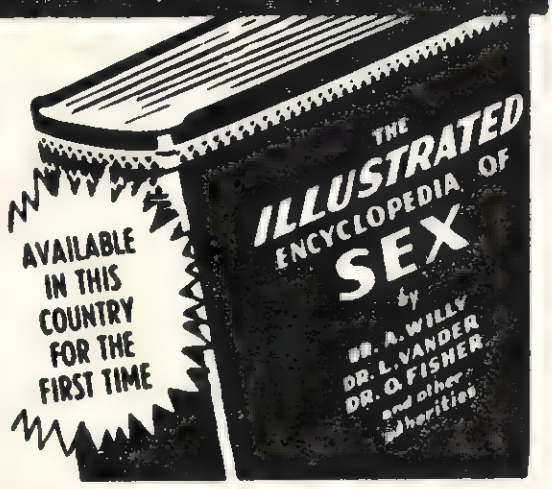

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(Continued from page 12)

The cook slept in the wagon, snug and dry under its canvas covering while the cowboys lay on the ground in their bedrolls during the worst storms. None of them dared crawl under the wagon for protection either at night or in the daytime. To make sure they stayed away, the cook always pitched his dishwater under the wagon—as was his recognized privilege.

The cook's bad temper probably came from the conditions under which he had to do his job. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't hope to keep dust and sand out of the food. He had to work with the meagerest of supplies, his fuel was often wet, insects menaced his every effort, and often he had to stand unprotected in the rain while making bread and stirring pots. Three times a day he had to feed fifteen or twenty hungry men towards whom he felt a certain responsibility. Conditions made it impossible to do the job well, and the cook would naturally be extremely touchy and sensitive about it. Some seem to have been so frustrated by the impossibility of it all that they took up horse stealing to keep their self respect. Another, when he tired of cooking, would slip across the border and become a general for a band of Mexican rebels—only returning to his original task after he had lost a couple of battles.

DESPITE his autocratic rule, the cook could sometimes be prevailed upon to cut hair, bandage wounds, sew britches, and dispense calomel and horse liniment. As the most privileged and out spoken member of the crew, he could be counted on to take the men's part against the owner. For instance, in a stingy outfit where the chow was poor or skimpy he might abandon the usual cry of "Come and get it!" and instead yell out, "Here's hell, fellers!"

The cook's peculiar position is perhaps best illustrated by the story of one who was bothered by a calf. This calf wanted salt, and it kept coming to the chuckwagon to chew the collars of the work team. Nothing the cook could do would keep the calf away, and finally he had ruined every one of the collars in his quest for salt.

One day the cook poured out a big pile of feed by the wagon to draw the calf in. Then he took a round piece of rawhide and attached cans of gravel to it so that they would bang and rattle when dragged over the ground. The calf came along as usual and began to feed happily by the wagon, whereupon the cook wired the cans to the calf's tail. Just to give the show a flying start he took a corn cob dipped in turpentine and poked it where it would do the most good.

The calf bellowed like it had been stabbed and sailed away hardly touching the ground. It headed straight for the range where the cattle were being rested for market, and stormed through the herd like an angry phantom. A thousand steers stampeded in every direction, frightened by the terrible noise. They spread far and wide over the range, for every time the calf would come up to a group, hoping to join it, a new stampede would start. The poor calf became a pariah, and the other cattle ran themselves to exhaustion.

Finally the owner decided the time had come for a mild rebuke to the cook. He rode up to camp, dismounted, and walked over to the chuckwagon where the cook was preparing the next meal. No one had dared mention the subject until then.

"You know," the owner began as respectfully as he could, "that stunt of yours the other day cost me a pile of money. Those cattle must have run off five thousand dollars worth of beef."

The cook was silent for a moment, his eyes still on his work. Then, not looking at the owner, he raised his eyes to the sky and addressed his reply to the universe: "By God, it was worth it to me!" ★ ★ ★

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By Thomas Calvert

Perhaps there was a place in the West for Maribelle Blood. But first she must prove herself a woman.

HE WAS a young man with bright blue eyes, a hawk nose, a slat mouth, and a prominent Adam's apple. His flesh was burned and leathery, his expression grave and contained with the experience of four years of war.

There was about him, though—or there had been—a certain homely likeableness, and in moments of exuberance the gravity would leave his face, showing something oddly boyish.

The boyish look broke through now as he sat huddled in his slicker on the hurricane deck of their Conestoga. He watched the three-day torrential rain thin, and then end abruptly, and the last clouds stream off like wild horses through the pagan sundown.

He turned into the canvas opening without thought, a man stirred with simple, primitive thanks and a surcease of worry. "Maribelle," he called, "the rain's over and you never saw such a sundown!"

"I can see it from here," his bride an-

The Breaking of Maribelle Blood

His mouth was thin. "I'm sorry I didn't turn out to be what you expected, Maribelle."

swered, her tone heavy, resentful, resistant to sharing any intimacy or mutual emotion.

The gladness drained from his face, leaving it wooden. He looked down at the gray, muddy water that swirled around the knees of his oxen and made small muttering sounds as it wound through the spokes of the big wheels. The water looked just about the way he felt. In the whole war he had never felt so hopeless, so desolate.

A double rainbow formed from horizon to horizon. He stared at it with no appreciation. He packed his pipe and lighted up, but the smoke tasted raw and bitter. He heard the girl moving about inside, but no further comment came from her, and he leaned forward on his knees, watching the purpling hills with knitted brows and hard mouth.

Three months was a long time to live in a wagon with a woman who hated you and disbelieved both your love and character. He wished now he had fully understood before the wedding night. Possibly, then, with gentleness and patience, he might have won her heart. As it was, all he had won was her eternal loathing, and doubt of any decency or gentleness within him.

It was dusk when she set a pan of food and mug of luke warm java down beside him. "Here's your supper," she said with challenge threading her flat monotone. "It's the best I can manage with what wood we have."

He made a desperate clutch for decent civility. "It's a wonder you're able to get anything hot at all!" he told her.

Her hands clutched into fists at her side. He felt her purposely misunderstanding him, taking his compliment for a slur, determined not to credit him with that much generosity.

"No doubt," she murmured, "a twelve-year-old Indian could do better!"

"Good lord, Maribelle," he blurted, "I only meant—"

"That a twelve-year-old Indian girl could feed you well in spite of everything on this sodden island!" she broke in stridently, and turned back inside the wagon.

He ate without taste, his spirits low. He hadn't said anything like that. What he'd said was, trying to lighten matters, that a twelve-year-old Indian would think she was in clover, and make feast medicine out of this.

NIGHT'S rain-cleared indigo sky blossomed with a million stars. The reflection was caught in the waters around them so that the prairie schooner seemed actually to be sailing in a sea of stars. It was a sight he had never experienced before, and he would have liked to share the wonder of it with her, but even if he commanded her to come out, she would resist the beauty. She would probably hate stars all the rest of her life because of it.

He had two more pipes, and found no solace in them, then fetched a damp blanket and bedded down alone inside the coffin seat. He had thought their worst worries and fears were over, but he'd forgotten that the waters would shed long after the rains stopped. All night long the tone of the waters deepened as they broke the wagon wheels. At midnight, flotsam began to appear.

With the first smudge of spreading gray and yellow light he felt the occasional movement of the big-bodied wagon. The bottom planks of the coffin seat were soaking, and he felt the stolid oxen leaning their weight forward against the yokes.

He flung out of his blanket and looked at the world of steaming vapor. The whole valley was a lake. The hills still looked like one great cascade. He surveyed their situation and wondered how he could keep the girl from realizing the seriousness of it. If he could keep her from the front of the wagon for a time, that might help. From the back, she couldn't see that the water had risen.

Her resentful monotone cut short the hope. "What do we do now that the rain is over?" she asked with defiant mockery.

He climbed to the hurricane deck and packed his pipe. There was no way out of things now but the painful truth. He said, "It's a question of whether our load will hold us, or whether I'll have to cut loose the oxen and lighten load so that we can float."

"Lighten load?" she repeated. "What could we spare?"

He put a light to his pipe, and the flare of the match fell across his face as firelight breaks against gray canyon rock. He said, "We may have to throw off the stove and barrel of china."

She looked at him steadily, her black eyes aglow like coals. "What's wrong with the plough and tools?"

"We'll need those most," he told her. There was no way to explain. She wanted no explanations.

Her arms made one convulsive movement to her sides and then she stood tense and rigid. *"Blood!"* she breathed his name. *"John Flint Blood!* They named you well—my husband!"

He sucked on his pipe without answer. There was no answer to that molten hate. When the mists began to steam off the world of water and lift and break, he called in, "If you'll empty your trunk, I'll dump the flour in there. We'll need the flour barrel for firewood."

He heard the sharp suck of her breath, like a hiss, and his mouth compressed at the merciless way he was forced to speak. All of her best clothes, all of her treasures, were in that trunk, and there was nothing else to put them in. A week on dry trail and they would be hopelessly dust-soaked and stained.

She came to the oval opening and leaned with the butts of her hands on the hurrican deck, her elbows bent a little inward. "Why did you bother to buy me from my father?" she demanded.

He took the pipe from his mouth and tapped it. He said with strained patience, "Maribelle, I didn't buy you. The money I gave him was for heavy woolens and articles of value that he will have to replace for your other sisters."

"Why didn't you ask for one of them if all you wanted was a woman to cook and beat?" she asked.

"Well," he told her on a husky note, "you happened to be the one I thought I'd love."

She gave a bitterly mocking, savagely hating blast of breath. You're not the kind of man who falls in love with a woman in ten minutes! But you had supper at our house and we were married and on our way by next high noon! What kind of a man but a brute would want a woman in love with another man anyway?"

He looked down at his big-knuckled, flat-backed hands. "I didn't know that you were so deeply in love," he said. "You didn't hate me so much then, Maribelle. You even said that you would try your best."

She gave a blast of breath through teeth that met. "I didn't know what I was marrying," she breathed. "I didn't know that because of what I couldn't give, and what you couldn't get, you'd set out to try and crush me like—like this!"

He knew what she meant. She meant the trunk. The stove and china if they had to lighten load. She probably blamed him for taking this trail as well. She probably blamed him for the storm.

He sucked a long breath through locked teeth. He said tonelessly, "We'd best shift that flour Maribelle. We need hot food."

When a hot sun broke away the thick pearling mists, they saw only three points in a diameter of nine miles that broke above the waters. A quarter mile to their left, the water looked glassier, and swelled. Half submerged objects shot by at incredible speed. Most could not be identified,

but an island like a log jam was clearly a drowned herd. A few living animals were swept by, showing the force and swiftness of the current.

MIDWAY of morning, a shack hove in sight at what normally would be the river bend. It shoaled on some part of the submerged bank. Movement showed in a hole in its uptilted corner, and a man came out and drew out a woman and three children who perched upon the ridge.

"Damned fools!" Blood muttered, "Why do they move like that?"

"Why you . . ." his wife breathed as if he were heartless. She leaped up to the hurricane deck, and before he could stop her, had whipped off her shawl and was waving it frantically and calling encouragement.

He saw the faces turn toward them, and then the lanky man jumped up, yelling hoarsely and excitedly waving back.

Blood cupped his hands to shout warning, but too late. The family's excited movements teetered the shack off its precarious lodging and it began pin-wheeling down-current, swinging and jarring against the underwater bank.

"John, do something!" his wife pleaded hysterically. It was the first time since their wedding night that she had addressed him by his Christian name.

He shifted position so that he could grab her ankle if she started to jump in a vain effort to go to their assistance. His face was ashen with the thought that since daylight the water had risen no higher upon the singletree, and that with care, an hour or two might have brought down the water level so that those poor souls out there were moored safely.

He said heavily, "There's nothing we can do but pray for them, Maribelle."

She looked down at him accusingly. "You could at least try to throw them a rope! You could wade over to the bank."

He contained himself with effort. "I couldn't throw that far in any case, and that current reaches to the edges."

His words were lost in the commotion of her disgust and hatred. As clearly as if she'd said it, he knew she considered him hard, indifferent, even yellow.

Twice, it looked as if the shack had sagged again, but each time it twisted off and continued its clumsy spinning along the edge of the river current. The girl cried a frantic mixture of prayer and cheer to them, but those on the shack fell into doomed silence as they neared and passed. But downstream, the man stood suddenly erect and sent back a brave, forlorn wave and called some croaking words.

Blood interpreted through set teeth. "Good luck and God bless you," he said.

The girl sagged down in the pool of her skirts, her emotions shocked beyond tears. Blood put away his pipe and looked at her awkwardly. He was a man with a bursting tenderness in him who is walled against expressing it. He could not speak to her, he could not touch her. Worse than she ever had, she hated him now for not making a futile effort. He could not tell her that it was the excitement of her call that had first thrown the shack back into the current; that under peril, in this merciless land, the harshest realism was usually best for all.

He looked at her with the hollowness of deep hurt filling his blue eyes. His hand moved an inch toward her head, then stopped, and he tore his attention from her abruptly and climbed down into the water.

He felt the pull of the current against his legs, but it was not as swift and solid as he had feared. He waded forward and spoke to the stolid oxen. The storm itself had not bothered them much, but the constant rise of water and three days of standing in it had eaten their spirit. They were not chewing their cuds and they looked out at this landless sea with a dull and hopless puzzlement.

He roughed their necks and stroked their

noses and talked to them a spell. A little song and music would have done their spirits good. But his wife would think it was meant to show his indifference to her feelings, and his callousness at the calamity of those poor souls being carried to their doom.

The water was too high to inspect the oxen's hoofs, but he pulled up their fetlocks and felt the play of their muscles under water, and felt the bottom of their hoofs, which were getting dozy from the wet. That was bad and he inspected the singletree carefully and felt certain the water had stopped rising. But it had not gone down any, and those beasts couldn't stand in wet much longer.

He went behind the wagon and climbed over the tailgate to get their feed. The front opening of the canvas top formed a frame for the girl, and she was a picture of desperate shock and bitterness. She did not move a muscle, but her eyes bore on him with dark fires as he measured a ration of their precious seed for feed.

He fed the oxen the precious stuff with his own hand to keep them from throwing and wasting even a grain. He was chilled clean through and would have liked mighty well to spend an hour or two in dry blankets inside the wagon. But his bride would consider that an invasion of the unspoken privacy they had put between them, and he set his jaws grimly to keep them from chattering, and busied himself at what chores he could find.

The storm had brought them some good as well as evil. The canvas top had caught and shed the rain into their water barrels and they were brimming with the sweetest water they'd yet had. He inspected the bottom of the wagon. It had been lappd by water but it was tight, and he did not think enough water had gone through to cause serious damage inside the wagon. Probably, more water had beaten through the canvas during the soaking deluge of the past twelve hours.

THE canvas was tight now. The rain had done it good. The soaking of wheels and the wagon in general was to the good. The long trek across the hot, arid plains had loosed the spokes and iron tires and shrunk the planks, and now the thorough wetting had restored them to their original tightness. He would like to mention that to the girl as a sign that there was compensation in the violence of this primitive land, but when he looked inside, she pulled her shawl tightly about her well formed shoulders, turned from him and crawled out onto the hurricane deck.

His mouth compressed and he rubbed the back of his bronzed neck and looked down at the muddy waters and felt as if he'd been whipped. Then his attention focused on a wheel. Damp marks showed above the water. Suddenly, the weight of worry lifted from him and he went splashing around to the wagon front calling thickly, "Maribelle, the water's dropping! We're safe—thank God, we're safe!"

She looked down at him without the slightest change of her resentful expression. "I wish it had kept on rising," she answered bitterly. "Maybe even you would have learned then what those poor people must have been suffering as they swept past while we did nothing!"

The relief flickered out of him like the dousing of a wick. He had no way to break the frigid barrier she had put between them that first night of their marriage, but he still hoped, and fought the explosion that would turn him harsh and brutal.

He moved forward again and spoke with the oxen. They were feeling better now with the sun simmering on them. They were chewing their cuds and sniffing the air, and looking off at a particular point in that great wet space. Finally, he made out the crest of a ridge not a quarter mile distant.

More as an excuse to get away from his wife's loathing than anything else, he unhooked the beasts and rode them through

the muddy waters. The exercise did them good and they nosed out the tops of grass upon the ridge, and their spirits lifted. But fresh alarm filled him as he dropped afoot for a stretch himself. With the dropping waters, the current had turned stronger. It struck him that the water was being pulled off the prairie now, and that a current like this might cut the wagon-wheels in right up to their hubs, and there'd not be a chance in hell of working the heavy wagon out in this slick muck.

Returning, he hitched the beasts at the back of the wagon to give them a change. Sundown was a riot of soft pastel colors that lay like veils upon a clean blue sky as he climbed aboard their schooner. None of the prairie's dusty hot savagery was in this sundown. It was a thing of rare delicacy, like the tones that tint a Creole beauty's skin.

He hoped the picture would gentle his wife's mood, but her eyes still smoldered. "I'll make supper when you build the fire," was all she said.

He crawled stiffly into the wagon to draw the best heat he could from their dwindling supply of precious wood. He would have given a good deal to sit on there while she got supper, watching her supple movements as he had watched her the night before their wedding, while toasting his waterlogged legs inside the oven. He was the kind of man to whom such simple, homely pleasures meant a great deal, and he was hungry for such small comforts after three months of unrelenting bitterness.

But she came inside to cook and stood there looking at him solidly, and the burn of her hate was hotter than the fire. "Is it ready?" she asked finally, her voice flat.

He rubbed his hands and nodded. "I think it will serve. Don't give it too much draft. There's no telling how long the run-off of the water will take."

She didn't move and she didn't take her eyes from him. She asked, "You knew this country before we met. You knew its treachery and violence, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, Maribelle," he conceded. "I spent three years bucking broncs out here."

She breathed a note of bitter breath. "How you must thirst to see misery, to test a woman's fears!" she murmured. "I suppose you thought that I'd break and crawl to you in terror simply because there was no other place to crawl. And those poor people today. Did that make you feel greater, Mr. Blood. That we were safe while they were riding to their doom and we did nothing? Did it give you satisfaction to see how it affected me?"

For an instant, his eyes splintered angry lights and his mouth twisted to answer. Then he closed it firmly and his jaws bulged, and the lights dimmed. "I'll wait for supper outside," he said, and went onto the front deck to watch the deepening veils of color masking the growing dusk.

At dawn, he awakened from an unrelaxing sleep and sat up shivering, struggling to read some strange sound upon the air. Then it came to him that it was the sound of the river, rushing pell-mell between its banks, snarling and roaring with wicked malevolence now that it was once again unchallenged king.

HE STOOD up to survey the country, but could not yet pierce the pearling mists. Under them, though, there was still water, and from the twist of the heavy bank of mist above the river, he saw where it had cut out great chunks of land and channeled new beds through the bends. It would cut hell out of some river towns before its fury abated.

For all that they had stood in water another day, the oxen were more cheerful, which was a good sign. He examined the wheels and found the night's run off had not trenched them in as deeply as it might have. By the time he had fed the animals, the mists were rising and lying in broken

flat slabs about five feet off the water, and looking under them, he saw evidence of ground on all sides.

It was a moment of great thanks that sprang from a man's simple, elemental nature, and he would have liked to have held his wife's hand and knelt in prayer. But that was impossible, and somehow, giving thanks, or feeling them, without her seemed profane. So he set to building fire with their last wood, feeling a bitter, breaking loneliness as he stood there in the same wagon with her, conscious of her hate.

By mid-morning, they could roll out by holding to the slopes and ridges. For once, the oxen seemed eager for the pull, in spite of the mud and their soaked hoofs. With incredible speed, the prairies dried, and in spite of the summer season, came alive with a bursting blanket of spring flowers.

It was like the springtime he had told her about. It was a sight that a young married couple should rejoice in and remember all their lives. He darted her secret glances, hoping to see some sign that now she'd relent, that at least she would notice and appreciate. But his young wife looked out at the scene without a softening of her mouth.

"Kind of pretty, isn't it?" Blood hazarded at last.

"If you like funeral blankets," she answered, thinking of those people. "And I suppose you do."

He winced but said earnestly, "Maribelle, there was nothing I could do. Believe me."

"You didn't try. You didn't care," she accused him. "At least if you'd gone toward them, it would have given them hope and some precious release from despair."

"What about you if I'd been drowned?" he asked.

"What about me anyway?" she asked stridently.

He looked at her with a man's desperate futility and frustration, and she turned her head and looked back at him levelly with ice in her eyes and hate in her heart.

Sucking mud through the hollows, lurching and jolting and teetering precariously at their off-trail course, they moved down through a valley filled with clear golden light and infinite flowers. And with violent erosion and rushing creeks that snatched huge chunks out of their new banks and snapped heavy boulders up like pebbles. Three times torrents broke their trail and they had to turn and bear northeast. He began to worry that they were going far off trail and were possibly lost.

He wasn't worried about finding his bearings again, but at the time it would take, and the privations that might be necessary. There was no wood in sight, and the rain had destroyed the scattering of chips. There was sign of wind up in the clean-swept sky and after a rain like that, it would be chill.

He darted his wife a sidewise glance, trying to estimate how much vitality she had left in her under that shell of ice and hate and anger. Before the storm, they had traveled drought country. At no time for over a month had they had good food, good water, and good sleeping conditions all at the same time. He had an idea that she could not take much more without a decent rest, and for all of her stubborn and truculent self-containment, she must be worried by the strangeness and bigness and savagery of this raw country. And a physcial break at this point of their journey could leave one open to serious mountain fever.

That was the worry in him and she sensed the worry, but misread it. Maybe unintentionally, maybe otherwise. She caught his glance and held it with her molten, challenging eyes and her pretty mouth twisted in a smile that was not pretty.

"Afraid you've lost the trail and may have to back-track, Mr. Blood?" she mocked him. "Afraid that you may have to take some of the beating you'd mete out to others?"

"I'm afraid," he told her, with an iron

check upon his voice, "that we may have to eat a few cold meals, Maribelle."

Her fine, jet eyebrows arched. "And that worries you? I had an idea you considered such things part of the training a body—especially your wife—needed for this country!"

He gripped himself hard and hunched forward, a man whose inward feelings were being shredded and mangled. The very things she was accusing him of were the things she was doing to him. But how could a man say that? And if an argument started and he came unhitched, heaven help them!

CHAPTER TWO

River of Death

HE KEPT his eyes keening the drying horizon and saw nothing suggesting civilization. But suddenly he smelled wood smoke upon the air. His head lifted like a bird dog's. He took bearings, and quartering on the smell, headed straight up a ridge, and they looked down on the chocolate-colored glint of the rushing river again, and on a homestead.

Or at least, what had been a homestead. Nothing much was left now except a wreckage-filled hole where the soddy had stood, and a few posts that outlined what had been the corrals and the barn. But the family had survived and saved most of the stock. They were combing the wreckage for whatever of value they could find, each new discovery rousing excitement in them as if they had suffered no harm and were discovering bonanza treasures.

A big, loose-hung man with hair jutting like a rooster's comb heard the screech and bang of their wagon and stood still to watch their approach. At a short distance, he started to move toward them, hailing, "Welcome, stranger, and we ain't ever seen anybody more welcome! First time today I've felt sure I wasn't nightmaring!"

He grinned and wiped hairy nostrils with the back of a bronzed and freckled hand, and took the ring of the off-ox to lead them onto hard ground where the wagon wouldn't settle. His squat, muscular wife beamed at them from under a poke bonnet, and five curious, freckled kids with hair like their father's skipped along beside the wagon.

Blood got down and introduced himself and his wife and regarded the fire of wrecked wood with appreciation. The homesteader, whose name was Homer, apologized for not having java, but as far as they could figure, the flood had run off with all of their supplies. That was easily remedied, Blood having plenty of supplies. Both he and his wife made the offer at the same instant, with the same words, and then they broke off dead, staring at each other self-consciously. It was the first time since their wedding that they had done anything voluntarily in unison.

A hopeful smile hovered around the corners of Blood's mouth, but the girl caught herself and hardened instantly. Her back stiffened and her head flung up and she turned her attention to Homer's wife, snubbing her husband so obviously that Homer looked away and blew his nose.

Sundown rolled the great gold and crimson wheel of olden gods across the land, and put a gold fringe along the purpling hills. The women busied themselves at getting a meal that was a feast, while the children stood by drooling, tantalizing themselves with the rich smell of food. There was good grass cleared at a little distance, and Homer helped Blood unhitch his oxen and picketed them out where they could graze, then showed him over the remains of what had been the homestead.

He whacked a corral post and shook it with his muscular hand. "Put in solid, put in solid, put in right," he grunted. "If I'd taken the time and sweat to do the rest that way, we'd still have a home." He

frowned and then allowed, "Well, this time, we build that way and no excuse! Nothing else to do until spring anyhow."

"Any tools left?" Flint asked.

Homer nodded thankfully. "Yessir, that's one thing the flood left us! Washed 'em all plumb out along with the barn, but the flooring must have spilled. I found every last tool trapped over yonder in a muck hole." He looked toward his squat wife, busy at the fire and gossip. "Would have swapped a few with the flood, though, if it had left her cookstove."

Blood started to speak, thought better of it, and they strolled back to the fire and to enjoy scalding java while supper readied. The homesteader's wife said with excitement, "Homer, these folks saw the poor Bassett family swept by, too—the Good Lord pity them!"

Maribelle's gaze came across the woman at her husband. "Almost," she said, "they were saved. Their shack lodged on the river bend but the flood knocked it loose."

Homer nodded somberly toward a turn in the river. "Same thing up here. Tore a man's heart to watch it. I could talk with Ben Bassett clear as I'm talking with you folks, but I couldn't get near him to help."

He looked curiously at Blood. "Nothing you could do either, I take it?"

Blood said gravely, "Nothing."

HE COULD feel his wife's eyes boring into him with disbelief, with accusation. For his benefit she remarked, "I called out our prayers and hopes. I like to think it did some good for a little space; they waved at us so excitedly, so hopefully. But then the shack jolted loose."

Both Homer and his wife stared at her, and then at Blood, and then back at her. Then they looked at each other, knowing Ben Bassett for an exciteable man, and picturing pretty close to what had happened. Homer's wife sucked in a deep breath to speak, but Homer shut her off.

He said heavily, "Well, maybe that moment of hope meant a great deal. Maybe it gave them the courage to keep their heads and spirits as they flooded down the river. They may be alive yet . . . we don't know."

"He called back," Maribelle said, and then her voice broke, and she had to turn from them to regain her composure. "He blessed us and wished us luck!" she said finally, and there was ice and steel and thunder in her voice. "Blessing us, who were safe and sound while he and his were dying! Blessing strangers who hadn't done a thing to help him!"

The woman waddled up to her and pulled her head down upon her shoulder. "These things happen," she consoled the girl. "They were good friends of ours and still Homer couldn't help."

The girl's shoulders jerked. "But they came by so near us . . . if we'd just been on the bank!"

Blood chewed at his lip and stared at the ground. There was silence, broken only by the simmering of the half wet wood and the dry, torn sound of the girl's sobs. When she lifted her red-rimmed eyes, she looked across at him with fresh, bitter accusation. The children had drawn aside and were huddled together in silence, not understanding, but feeling the weight of the occasion. Homer had hunkered down and was whittling shavings into a small pile. The woman patted her shoulder, and turned to the fire without looking at Blood.

The girl noted all that, and vindication brought color back into her cheeks. It was clear to her that these people, knowing the country and having seen the flood themselves, could picture what had happened and Blood's callousness and selfish caution, and could see him for what he was . . . could see him as she saw him.

Dusk slipped down the hills and flooded over them and it grew cool. The rich smell of food and comfort of the fire took possession of them, crowding out the ten-

sion and embarrassment that mention of the Bassetts had roused for a time. Homer's wife ladled out the supper and they all stood with bowed heads while Homer said grace with heartfelt thanks, and spoke a brief prayer for the Bassetts.

They fell to supper immediately, the homesteaders bending their heads over their plates and giving full attention to the food. The girl looked across once at her husband, her look telling him that he could see now what others thought of him. He could read their condemnation in the way they avoided looking at him at each mention of the Bassetts.

She saw the desperate streak of his eyes before he dropped them. She saw the bulge of his jaws, and a cruel and mirthless smile touched her mouth, and she was filled with a merciless satisfaction at the sick way he ate.

The embarrassment of their estrangement was avoided by the situation, the women and children sleeping inside the wagon and the coffin seat, while the men bedded down, rangewise, by the fire. At dawn they were all up, and by sunrise had taken care of all chores and eaten and Homer was helping Blood yoke up his oxen.

Blood got out what supplies he could spare . . . a peck of flour, a bushel of beans, a side of bacon, salt, some jerky, java. He stood looking the wrecked place over, and looking at the freckled kids in their worn, patched clothes.

He said, "Reckon it gets a little breezy hereabouts in winter."

"Well, it sure don't get hot," Homer grunted. "Weather pours in through that gap there. But we'll have a new soddy built quick enough." He looked at his kids proudly. "Do a regular man's work when they have to, these hellions."

Blood looked over Homer's stock. The horseflesh was mustang, neither bad nor good, about the average he could catch himself in the hills westward. But he said, "Tell you, Homer, we'll be needing a driving horse and that dun looks good. How would you swap for our cookstove?"

HOMER started to scoff at the one-sided trade, then caught the pent-up hope in his old lady's face, and frowned, feeling the forces of pride and fairness battle with need and proverty. He knew what the offer was—a made offer, simply a means of giving him the stove without making him feel humiliatd by a gift. Without the kids, he would not have considered it. But there were the kids, and winter was coming, and wood was hard enough to come by in this barren land. A fireplace would be just about impossible.

He had to steel his expression to hide his emotions. "What will you folks do," he asked, and his voice was flat with contaimment and his expression wooden.

"We'll pick up one first town that has one," Flint told him lightly. He slapped Homer on the shoulder and grabbed his hand and grinned. "A deal?"

Homer swallowed. He couldn't speak. He just nodded and turned and clumped off to rope the pony. Maribelle stood by, silent and frigid, her eyes molten on her husband, and contempt lying heavily about her mouth. He knew she didn't begrudge the gift, but she begrudged his giving it. He was glad when the time came to roll out, and he could use the excuse of walking by the oxen to get them warmed up, and so be free of his wife's anger.

But at noon they had to stop, and then she asked it. Scalding of voice she said, "I don't suppose you could have given him the plough instead?"

He looked at her violently and started to explain, and then read her disbelief of anything he might say, and sucking a long breath through his teeth, said simply, "They will need the stove, and we have money for another."

"That was my mother's stove," she said. "I learned to cook on it. I will never know another stove as well in my life."

"Do you want me to go buy it back?" he demanded.

"No," she said. "I just want you to know that I know the real reason you rigged that trade. You were trying to buy their gratitude to make up for their contempt after they figured out what had happened when the Bassetts were swept past us. They didn't look at you after that."

"If that's all you've got to say, I've heard enough," he said.

"No," she corrected, "you'll hear this, Mr. Blood. You tried to buy them, but they didn't buy. They took that stove in desperation because of the children, but there was no friendship on Homer's face when he did."

He said harshly, "All right, Maribelle. You've said it."

"Not all of it," she pressed on cruelly. "You wanted to buy them, and in their condition any gift would have served. He'll need a plough and tools as much as a stove. But you didn't offer them. You offered the thing you knew would hurt me. Only it doesn't hurt that much, Mr. Blood. I'm glad they have it. I'm glad for the kids!"

He stood with his fists knotted and his legs spraddled, glaring out at the horizon and feeling the terrible cruelty of her whip and knowing that nothing he might say or do would make her see things straight. Whatever he did, she would put a misinterpretation on it. How could he make her believe that Homer's graven contenance had been the mask a man wears to cover the turmoil of strong emotions? How could he tell her that they had not looked at him after mention of the Bassetts because they had read the picture rightly, and were embarrassed for him that it was an errant act of his wife's which had probably sent them onward to their death?

"Try as you will, you'll never break me!" she was breathing. "Destroy my clothes, give away my personal treasures, lash me with storms and blizzards and droughts and wrong trails. Take me to some desolate desert to dry up like a tumbleweed in heat and loneliness. You'll never break me! I have my scorn and hate, John Flint Blood, and it will not desert me!"

He had his hands gripped behind his back. He could remember a time during war when he had strained to a man's utmost to lift a gun carriage off a wounded brother in arms, but the strain then had not torn at him like this. This was something so deep that it tore a man's insides and twisted his very heart.

But there was no answer and he knew it, and his voice was simply harsh and flat as he said, "If you've finished now, let's eat."

They pressed along the trail they'd been told, holding a taut silence, and at sundown reached the town of Pleasant Rivers. It was anything but pleasant now. It was demolished, a mass of rubble and wreckage. Even those buildings left standing had been warped and strained and twisted.

The town had been located in the tongue where two rivers met. The rivers were still running a full flood, boiling, frothing, angry, rushing. Their growl was an ominous and sinister sound behind all other noise.

The population was divided into four groups. The youngsters were gathering in and holding stock from the outlying country. The women, to the oldest, were occupied with keeping fires up and vittles cooked for their men and tending to the hurt and sick. The men were about equally divided between a group currycombing the wreckage for possible survivors and greatly needed supplies, and a group on the river, doing their best to rope in live stock and upstream survivors who floated past.

BLOOD went into a smashed, mud-filled saloon that was serving its liquor free to the endless relays of dead weary, sweat-soaked men. He came out shortly and

stood on the remains of a stoop looking out over his wagon at the vivid sunset. He crossed through the sucking dust-topped mud finally and climbed up beside her.

He said very slowly, "Maribelle, they are rushing a train east for supplies and it's rolling out at dawn. It will take you to a town from where you can reach your home by stage."

He leaned backward into the wagon and rummaged and came up with a sow's ear purse. He counted the gold pieces into two piles, put one pile back into the purse and held it toward her.

The sundown was in her eyes and showed them shining with contempt. "You found you couldn't break me, so now you're sending me back where I won't embarrass you!" she challenged. "But it just happens, Mr. Blood that I am needed here for a time by the looks of things."

"It just happens also," he said through tight lips, "that you are needed on the train if you're going back, which I am sure you wish to. The train is carrying a number of badly hurt and sick people, and needs nurses."

Her eyes mocked him for a long moment, and then she took the purse "If I can be of Christian use and rid of you at the same time, I'm grateful," she said bluntly. "I'm sure you'll find other women who are weaker and will crawl and whimper beneath your whip, so that you can feel strong and mighty in your vanity, Mr. Blood."

"Very probably," he said dryly, and rasped a yell and goaded the oxen. "You can say what you wish when you get back home, Maribelle. That I ran away, or that I'm dead. I will change my name as of now and here. I will never bother you again in any way."

She said nothing, but sat straight of back with her head high, feeling a certain cruel and bitter victory. In every way but manhandling he had tried to make her crawl, to crush her, and she had proven the stronger and he knew it. She had been strong as polished steel. He had meant to break her, but she had broken him instead, and shame and weakness and fear of the resistence in her had forced him to this decision to free himslf of her hate and loathing and bitter scorn before he broke himself entirely.

All the way out to camp she though that, going clear back in her mind to the wild, hysterical, unthinking day of their marriage. True, she had consented under her family's urge and pressure. She had not disliked him, then, or his homely looks, and the man she really loved was a ne'er-do-well who couldn't marry her. But then there had been his fierce, brute-like ardor of the wedding night, and she had begun to recognize him for the callous and selfish clod he was. And shortly, she had seen the craft and cunning and cruelty of his nature, the ugly claws and thoughts clothed in words of endearment and talk of courage. By then it had been too late to seek the succor of her family. They were already out on trail, into a wilderness where a husband owned a bride by savage possession and the force of her necessity. And then, even in hate, marriage was a binding thing in people of her stock until such time as both were willing to agree to estrangement.

The fires of the bustling camp where the wagon train was being formed showed through the sooty dusk ahead. There was no time here for useless gossip and palaver. This had been a freight train headed west, and after a good deal of argument, the train master had consented to dump his freight and turn back as a hospital train to pick up and rush food back before this flooded-out community starved.

The train master was a hoary giant of frosty blue eyes, and oddly for his business, a man of deep religion and respectability. He agreed to take Maribelle under his personal protection. By coincidence, he had a daughter of about her age also traveling with him. He found her a crate in which she could pack her effects, and

within an hour, she was moved out lock, stock and barrel from Blood's wagon into his.

She now was given duties to see to immediately. It would be well toward midnight before this bustling camp got to bed. She stood with her husband beside their wagon, with the sounds of the camp and groans of the sick forming a background for their thoughts, and she studied him as fire played across his face.

SHE had thought this would be a moment of elation and victory, but now that it had come, she found her hate fireless and her contempt spent. All she could feel for him was pity, and to her surprise she felt a pathos in this parting for herself. In spite of everything, there was something so darkly final, so irretrievable, in parting from your husband.

She looked down at the ground and murmured, "John, maybe I have been harsher than was just. I wish—I sincerely wish—that things might have been otherwise. I wish you had turned out to be the man I thought you might have been."

His mouth was thin, but he managed a hard-bitten smile. He said on a thick tone he could not fully control, "I'm sorry I didn't turn out to be what you expected, Maribelle. I will remember losing something that I would rather cherish."

She thought of the way he had connived for an excuse to get rid of that stove she treasured, and irony touched her, but she was sad with pity for him, with some misty sadness for herself that he could not fully understand. She looked at the hairy points of his ears, and then at the way the shadows and lights fell through the wild wave of his hair, for he held his hat.

For a moment, weakness took her, and she remembered that for all the misery he'd given her, he'd never been rough or physically brutal. But then she remembered the cautious, callous way he had let the Bassetts pass.

Her back stiffened and her heart hardened, but she put out her hand. "Well, there's no use in talk," she said. "We made a mistake, and we both think this is best."

He shook hands and said, "Whatever you say, Maribelle."

She managed a frosty smile, and his smile was grim. Then she turned and moved away to find Ma Coles, in charge of the hospital. Turning up the wagon line, she cast back a glance. He was still standing just as she had left him, except that his eyes followed hers. He gave a small, half-hearted lift of his hand, and uncertainty bolted through her and she had the sudden, chaotic wonder, "Am I making a fresh mistake?"

But then going back down the wagon line on her first duties she saw him climbing up into the coffin seat. She thought hotly, "With all the need of men!" and was filled with fresh contempt and a resurgence of her bitterness and loathing.

The wagon was still there at dawn, off to one side in the steaming mists, but she saw no sign of life about it. She made breakfast and ate with Captain Mowrer and his daughter, waited through the raw-voiced turbulence of hooking up balky teams, then climbed up upon Mowrer's wagon. Shortly, the trumpet put its harsh notes rattling upon the airs, and Mowrer's clear, deep-chested voice boomed out, "Wagons, roll!"

They had to pass back through the town and go some way down river and pray for a ford, and Mowrer's daughter was all a-twitter at the gossip that had reached camp during the night. Some man named Dunne had become the hero of the moment, rigging a cable line across the tempestuous river under flares. Working from it in a sling, he had already saved three lives and roped in the county's prize Brahma before it was drowned. He was still supposed to be working, and they might get a look at him as they passed.

THEY came to the town and threaded through the debris to the trail beside the river. Mowrer pulled up his train in homage to look at a man who dangled from a pulley line out midway of the river. The man's face was blue with fatigue and he looked sodden, but the train had arrived at a particularly exciting moment. A section of barn was down there in the rushing waters, a man, two frightened women, and eight frightened kids riding its back.

The man on the pulley line, that would be Dunne, had his legs tangled through a hole in the barn and was holding it against the current, while other men ashore were rushing to rig other lines and get out there to rope it. The current was strong, and the strain was near to tearing Dunne to pieces. He was a good way out, but they could actually see how his body strained.

A strange, tense silence held the crowd ashore, which the girl noted without realizing it. All she could think of was the fear and desperation of those people straddling the barn and watching Dunne with frozen faces . . . their need of hope and encouragement at such a moment.

As she had with the Bassetts, she leaped erect, grabbed off her shawl and opened her mouth to call. Mowrer's hard, calloused hand clapped over her mouth with a slam that reeled her head. He looked down at her with fiery criticism and command.

"Don't you dast make a sound!" he warned her.

He stared at her upbraidingly a moment, then took away his hand. She gasped and blinked, dumbfounded. "But I only wanted to call something to give them heart!" she told him.

"You want to spook 'em into jumping or turning, and maybe twisting that piece of barn right off Dunne's legs?" Mowrer demanded.

Her head began to reel now from other causes. The muttering of the river became an ear-splitting roar in her ears. Suddenly, clearly as if they were out there, she saw the Bassetts again, and the way Ben Bassett had jumped up at her call to wave and call back . . . and the sickening way his shack had teetered, and then swung off from its precarious mooring.

"Oh, no!" she cried within herself and began to see the things that had happened since from a new standpoint.

Now men were out beside Dunne and dropping with grapples and ropes to make the piece of barn fast and lift off the smallest children. They were reeling Dunne back in, dead spent, and she caught a clear look at him in the long, flat golden rays of first sunlight.

Tortured and blue and gaunt as his face was she recognized the man called Dunne for her husband.

"Oh, no!" she cried, aloud this time, and jumped from the high hurricane deck of Mowrer's wagon and ran toward him.

He was out. Out cold. The fight to hold that shed against the river current had taken the last ounce of his endurance out of him. They rubbed him and fed him brandy, and the doctor pronounced him safe enough, but he stayed in a coma of complete exhaustion. He was still in it when they drove him out to the deserted camp and lifted him up into his wagon.

She stayed by him all day while he lay motionless, and then, when he started to stir toward evening, she took pencil and paper in hand.

Dearest John: I can't hope that you'll ever forgive me. Only a great soul could have shown your patience and self-containment. I have no right to ask for your charity, but I want you to know that now I understand fully and I pray in sorrow for what I did to the poor Bassetts.

If my heart were worthy, it would be yours and forever humble. I have been mean and cruel and selfish.

I know that now, John, but I guess too late.

Sorrowfully,
Maribelle.

She pinned the note on his blanket and went outside. She sat on the coffin seat to watch the sun sink out of brassy clouds into the bosom of the purple hills.

The start of his pony drummed through her somber introspection. He went by the front of the wagon at a gallop, his hair wild, his face wilder, calling "Maribelle, Maribelle!" as he headed eastward in the trail of the wagon train.

She jumped to her feet and tried to call after him, but no sounds came. Her voice was frozen with guilt and shame. Then she thought that he'd have to stop in town to find out which way the wagon train had gone, and he'd learn she had been with him.

And suddenly she was crying with hope and happiness, his call ringing inside of her like golden chimes. She prettied up as she had not done since her last date with the ne'er-do-well, and remembering that, wondered how she could have thought of him again when she had such a husband.

She gave him the glow of a fire to guide him back through dusk's first darkness, and stood contrite and abject and humble as he jumped down from his pony.

"John . . ." she murmured.

But you couldn't talk with a man kissing you with such devoted and tender passion. And then there was her own passion, rising out of remorse. Let him be cruel as a man could, the crush of his arms roused her own love of him, and the crush of his lips was sweet.

"John!" she breathed. "My dear, my dear!" Then suddenly remembering. "The supper's burning!"

"Damn the supper!" he told her and swept her off her feet. That night they slept with the top up and the bright twinkling stars looked down on them. ★ ★ ★

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TOO TOUGH FOR TEXANS!

By Will C. Brown

The standing rule at Windmill School for all new teachers was: Lick your toughest pupil —or get out of town!

THE new teacher whipped the overgrown Tucker boy on the third day after the opening of the Windmill school, and two dozen awed-eyed nester kids hurried home with the news of it as though reporting sight of hostile Indians. That night, at the supper tables of sheep spreads and cow outfits up and down Catclaw Valley, people said that the young

The impact was like a sledge breaking rock.

teacher, Bowie Jones, should have been told about the Tuckers.

Holly Ellis, who rented a room to the pale young teacher from Tennessee, was already itching with curiosity when Jones rode back to Holly's 'dobe ranchhouse in late afternoon.

"Heard you licked Orvie Tucker," Holly said without preamble.

"Caught him cheating," Bowie Jones said.

"Is that bad?" Holly shifted his rheumatic frame in the porch rocker.

"Same as stealing."

Bowie Jones balanced on the porch rail and took a deep breath, looking off across the mesquite shadows that dappled an eternity of prairie distance. "By gad!" he exclaimed to Holly, grinning, "a man can just *breathe* better out here. I haven't had a touch of asthma since I left Tennessee. No foliage—you got no trees in this part of Texas except those mesquites. It's air a man can breathe!"

"Then get you a belly full now," Holly retorted. "You're just one-third through with whipping Tuckers."

The grin partially disappeared. Bowie Jones gave Holly a quick look.

"How you mean, Mr. Ellis?"

"Call me Holly, son," the grizzled nester complained. "I've told you that ten times. What I'm talking about is Bog Tucker and his oldest boy, Dutch. They're not gonna like it, you whippin' Orvie. Bog and Dutch're the reasons Orvie is dad-blamed near grown and still in the sixth grade. They've run off school teachers faster'n the settlement could hire 'em."

Jones looked out into the prairie again and ran a hand over his head to throw a dangling crop of light-colored hair out of his blue eyes. He was thinking of Orvie Tucker, a sullen hulk of a boy, nearly as old as Jones and fifty pounds bigger. The Windmill school wouldn't be a bad place if Orvie hadn't started to be a school room problem almost from the first hour. But when he had felt compelled today to lay the strap across Orvie's burly back, he had not thought of the kind of repercussions Holly seemed to be worried about. He unconsciously worked his hand muscles and asked Holly what about Bog and Dutch? Were they as no-good as Orvie?

"Bog will go for his likker jug and Dutch will start sharpenin' a nine-inch pocket knife he puts a lot of pride by," Holly said. "That give you an idea?"

"Bad ones, are they?"

"Scum of the country. I don't want to alarm you, but you better be told. Bog and Dutch will sure as hell jump you for whippin' Orvie. They think it's some kind of personal insult. That's the kind of low-down ignorant galoots they are, figurin' that the teacher whipped Orvie so now they got to whip the teacher. Supposed to prove the Tuckers don't take no messin' with or something. You follow me?"

Holly's wife called from inside and Jones said quickly, "Sit still, Holly. I'll get it!" He vaulted agilely over the banister, dog-trotted to the woodpile and loaded his left arm with split stove wood. When he came back from the kitchen, dusting his sleeve with right hand, his left was clutching a fat slice of apple pie. He winked at Holly. "There was a method in my madness."

Holly's eyes twinkled. "Anybody else, I'd say you was spoilin' your supper, but not you. You eat like a horse. Bet you've put on five pounds in a week, and you're beginnin' to get a little sun brown over that pekid white you come here with."

"Came here," Jones corrected. "Past tense, Holly."

"Anyway, you know what I mean," Holly retorted. "The pekid look you showed up with."

"I'd been indoors quite a while," Jones said, sampling the pie. "Finishing my education. All I could think about was trying to get a teaching job out in Texas, and here I am! How's that for luck?"

The worried frown came back on Holly. He said soberly, "You may not think you're so damned lucky, if you rile those Tuckers."

Bowie Jones chewed thoughtfully, his mind seeming to consider some distant thing. He said slowly, "I've known some bad people, back where I was. The way I see it, I'm paid to teach something to about twenty kids of all sizes and I can't teach them if I can't have discipline, and I can't have that if Orvie Tucker is running the school instead of me. The first day I put him on a front seat because he was a big boy and he looked like a trouble-maker. He just got up, moved to the back, jerked some scrawny little kid out of a seat, and took it over for himself. I let that pass."

Holly cocked his head and eyed Jones with keen interest. "You didn't contest him then, huh?"

"I was just trying to get the school started. But it was plain that Orvie was out to run the room and me with it. The next day he poured a bottle of ink down Nelly Stephens' back. He grabbed one little boy by the arm and twisted it till the kid screamed bloody murder. I told him to stay in, that I wanted to talk with him. He just walked out with me calling to him. But today he was sitting there copying all the arithmetic answers off a paper he had grabbed from a desk across the aisle."

"So that's when you whipped him?" Holly asked.

"Cheating is the same as stealing," Bowie Jones said doggedly. "That's one thing I can't take—cheating. I figured this one had better be my round before he had me on the ropes. So I went back with the strap. You could have heard a pin drop. Orvie tried to get up, but I held his wrist, and that took care of that. I was still wielding the strap when he twisted away and ran out the door. It will suit me just fine if he doesn't come back."

"I'm afraid he'll be back," Holly grunted. "Bog and Dutch flankin' him."

THEY jumped Bowie Jones on Saturday afternoon in front of the Catclaw Mercantile down at the cross-roads. The first he knew, he faced a black-whiskered man of larded girth who smelled of whiskey and sheep.

"You the feller that whupped Orvie?"

There was no time for an answer and Bog didn't wait.

The anvil-heavy fist that had jerked Jones about had a doubled-up mate that was already coming at him with all Bog's two hundred and thirty pounds behind it. Red and white streaks exploded in Jones' head, both then and when he hit the plank walk.

He lay sprawled there, stunned. When he tried to sit up, shaking his head to clear the blindness out of him, he saw from one eye the towering wrath of Bog and a younger copy of the big man. Dutch had the same kind of hate on his map as his pa, with his right hand shoved down in the knife pocket of his overalls.

"I'll teach you to hit my boy!" Bog muttered. He turned to the store's buggywhip rack beside the door and jerked out a buggywhip.

Jones struggled dazedly to his feet, feeling his right eye already swollen half-closed. Bog's mammoth arm descended and the buggywhip lashed across the professor's shirt. Bog raised the whip again and Dutch's hand came out with the pig-sticker.

Jones ran. In that befuddled moment, it was in his mind only to get away. The onlookers on the porch and clustered at the store door watched silently as Bog followed a few steps down the walk, then stood with whip still cocked as Jones got to his horse, mounted, and rode for home.

That night, in the kitchen, Holly Ellis shifted to peer down critically at Jones' eye in the lamp light.

"Past tense or present tense," Holly reported, "it's swoll to beat hell."

"Your cussing is worse than your grammar!" Mrs. Ellis scolded.

"The meat's helpin' it some," Holly said, turning over a cut of raw beef in his hand. "I'll put the other side to it now. It's gonna be black a while, but the meat's takin' down the lump, a little."

"We never had beefsteak back in the—back at the academy where I was," Bowie Jones said. "I always used half of a fresh-killed chicken for a black eye, if I could get the chicken. They had a doctor there but there were so many black eyes around he wouldn't pay any attention unless your eyeball was half out."

Mrs. Ellis, fussing around Bowie like a riled-up bantam hen, kept saying contemptously, "Those low-down Tuckers! Somebody ought to *do* something!"

"Guess nobody's itchin' for the job," Holly said matter-of-factly. "Bowie, I wouldn't go to school for a day or two, till this blows over a little. Let the kids have a holiday, it won't make no difference."

"I must have looked great," Bowie commented, gingerly feeling the reddish-dark mass of his swollen eye. "Running like a fool with that big ox after me with a buggywhip."

"What about staying home tomorrow, like Holly says?" Mrs. Ellis insisted.

One side of Bowie Jones' thin mouth formed a tight grin as he sought and found Mrs. Ellis with his good eye.

"Tomorrow is the *one* day I got to be there," the teacher murmured. "It's likely to be the most important day in the history of the Windmill school."

He flexed his hand muscles while Holly made the beefsteak secure to his eye with a wrap of dishtowel. Holly's glance followed Jones' hand movements. They were big-knuckled hands with traces of old scars.

"That academy you went to back in Tennessee," Holly said carelessly, "it probably didn't have no books to teach you how to run a school that had a Orvie Tucker in it."

"Not exactly," Jones agreed. "They did know how to teach you quite a lot of things not in any books, though."

JONES faced the schoolroom from his desk at the blackboard, looking over his charges with his good eye.

This had involved, all day, extra twisting of his neck and turning of his head, to bring his vision to a focus. The room of assorted-size nester kids had been painfully quiet and well-behaved. The furtive looks they stole at the unlovely countenance of the damaged professor were a mixture of amusement at his black eye and awesome tension over the magnitude of the violence that had come into their midst. Jones could see that the Tucker affair had unquestionably made Windmill school life an exciting thing, like a death or a barn fire in the community.

From where he overflowed a back seat, Orvie Tucker had spent the day belligerently looking about for somebody to notice him, and sullenly resentful when the younger kids gave him wide berth.

"I'd like to speak to Orvie Tucker a moment after school," Professor Jones announced. "Orvie, you stay. The rest of you are dismissed."

But the others tarried, after their first hurrying exit to the school yard. They delayed their usual rush for the road and prairie paths, looking back fearfully and curiously to the sun-bleached frame structure where some mysterious catastrophe might be in the making, with Orvie and Professor Jones in there.

"I want to tell you that I'm sorry about our little trouble," Professor Bowie Jones said.

Orvie leered, seeing that the teacher was trying to make peace with the Tuckers. Professor Jones walked on to the back of the room where Orvie stood with feet planted apart, his fleshy face screwed into a pattern of surly triumph.

"But, Orvie," said Jones, "you are

within four years as old as I am, and you're a head taller and a good many pounds heavier. You're not really a boy, Orvie—eighteen is old enough to be a man. So I have got to teach you like a man."

He knocked Orvie down.

Orvie never saw the fast footwork, the right uppercut. Jones' tight knuckles rode into Orvie's right eye and Orvie fell so solidly that the kids in the road thought the cast iron stove had tumbled down.

Jones went to the corner and got a bucket of water and sloshed it into Orvie's face. When Orvie stirred and sat up, Jones went out and mounted his horse and rode home to the Ellis place.

Both Holly and his wife were on the porch, seemingly busy patching some harness, but anxiety and curiosity were written plainly on them.

"How'd you make out today?" Holly asked casually, giving close attention to sewing a strap on a backband.

"No trouble," Jones said. "No trouble at all."

* * *

Those who had seen it from the road told the unlucky ones who had missed it—with embellishments—and everyone had re-told it with additional embellishments at the Catclaw supper tables. Not a pupil, from first-graders to "seniors" in the sixth grade, was tardy next morning. None, that is, but Orvie.

A hush fell over the room when Orvie shuffled in. Twenty-odd necks craned, first to Orvie coming in with a black eye, and then forward to Professor Jones and *his* black eye.

"Up here, Orvie," Jones said quietly. "This front seat—I've moved Tim Bridges back to your old seat."

There was a prolonged silence. Then Orvie plodded down the aisle and clumsily slid his bulk into the front desk.

The two black eyes faced each other across the six feet of intervening space. Orvie wiped his nose with the back of his hand and buried his head in the first book he touched.

Bog Tucker and Dutch rode up just before the noon recess.

They dismounted in the road and methodically tied their horses to the fence posts. They came on, at a purposeful plod, across the dusty school yard, with Dutch just a step behind and to the side of his pa.

Bowie Jones sighted them through the open doorway and abruptly ended the fourth-graders' spelling lesson.

He looked at Orvie, catching the big Tucker boy tenderly feeling his swollen eye, and Jones' hand came up in unconscious duplication of the movement as he felt his own puffy eye flesh. Then he massaged his fingers and moved unhurriedly down the aisle.

As if they had smelled the Tuckers coming, all heads turned to follow Bowie. The pupils, a row at a time as he passed, gasped audibly when they caught sight of what was looming up in the thin September sunlight of the school yard.

He met them just outside the door.

Dutch moved around to flank Bog. The big man started proceedings by first holding his black whiskers down and spitting carelessly to one side, keeping his red-rimmed eye slits holding to Jones. Dutch sunk his fist down in his knife pocket.

Jones moved two paces aside so his feet would be clear of the rock step. He was thinking that they were awfully big men, over two hundred pounds apiece, and were going to be hard to put down, and that he had better be at it.

Bog was just opening his mouth and his two beefy hands were forming mighty fists when Jones stepped out with left foot, weight rocking forward, then back to the ball of his right, chin down to left collar bone. He feinted with his advanced left hand, although he did not need to, with Bog so solidly planted flat-footed and wide

open. And when Jones' right swing then flashed out of nowhere to connect with Bog's upholstered chin, the impact was like a sledge breaking rock. Bog melted down as if his sinews had unravelled, and it took all the speed Jones could turn on to catch him one-two with right and left jabs to right and left eyes, before Bog was just a pile of overalls, meat and whiskers, in the red dust.

Dutch's knife was coming out as Jones pivoted in rhythmic shoulder swing to first smack Dutch's right eye with a left jab, and then, in the return shoulder swing, planted a right fist to Dutch's left eye. Dutch had time to mouth a curse and start one blind haymaker which Jones ducked. Then the teacher waded in with rights and lefts to Dutch's stomach, nose and chin.

JONES sat on the rock step, looking at his bloody knuckles. When Bog at last lumbered groggily to his feet, followed by the almost sightless Dutch, Jones stood up, too, and again moved away from the step.

Bog and Dutch made circling motions with their heads, trying to see each other. Bog glared hard at Jones for a long moment with his good eye. He raised a hand and felt carefully of his whiskered jaw, holding the hair down to spit aside, then he said, "C'mon, Dutch."

Dutch was already turning, stumbling off ahead of his pa, looking back a little, and Bog crowded after him. They went to the gate and untied bridle reins from the posts.

It was then that the commotion broke out behind Jones—sounds that ripped the heavy prairie silence apart and made him whirl in real fright.

The pupils were jammed in doorway and windows, yelling at the Tuckers in high and nervous shrieks of taunts and laughter. The little ones squealed and made faces, and the bigger boys yelled suddenly brave and daring insults. The jeers mounted in volume—in roars and squeaks of jubilant hysteria. The Tuckers mounted and rode away.

Jones re-entered the schoolhouse. The pupils hurried to their desks. In complete silence, he walked down the aisle.

Orvie Tucker's head was buried in an arithmetic book.

Jones paused alongside his desk. "Tell 'em to use raw beefsteak on those eyes, Orvie. That's what I used."

"Yes, sir," Orvie said, and bent closer to the book with one dirty fingernail underlining the words he intently read.

Holly Ellis was so busy cleaning a currycomb on the front porch that he hardly had time to notice Jones when the professor came home in the late slants of the September sun. Mrs. Ellis likewise seemed intent on running a black thread through the eye of a needle over a lap laden with garments to be patched. Jones waited, facing the prairie pasture and taking great gulps of the dry Texas air.

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"Moon Sellers come by while ago," Holly mumbled.

"*Came* by," Mrs. Ellis corrected.

"Dammit, he was *here*!" Holly exploded. "Said his kid flew in from school with quite a story to tell. Where you been?"

"Down at the store," Jones said. "Just sitting on the store porch, visiting with the loungers. Funny thing, they're all right interested in the Windmill school."

"Let's see those hands!" Mrs. Ellis ordered.

Quickly, he put his skinned knuckles behind his back.

Holly said, "This is the gol-dangdest black-eyed community in Texas." Then, dropping the currycomb and fixing Jones with a direct stab of his little eyes, he demanded, "That there academy back in Tennessee teach you to fight?"

"Yes," Jones said mildly. "I guess you might say that was their main course." His voice went to a far-away tone. "I guess I should tell you, Holly, and you, ma'am," nodding to the upraised eyes of Mrs. Ellis, "about that school where I was educated. The Buckle Mountain Academy is not a regular college. It's, well, it's the state reformatory. You might even say, a prison—that's what it amounted to. For boys—kids that got into trouble. Like me."

Holly said, "The trustees thought it was a college."

"They helped us get jobs," Jones said. "I got my education there during my sentence. Came out with a teaching certificate and the asthma. And one other thing." His mouth twitched. "I was lightweight boxing champion—and there were some right rough fighters in Buckle Mountain."

"So you wanted to come to Texas to teach and get over the asthma," Mrs. Ellis said sympathetically.

"Yes, ma'am. And away from fighting."

"Moon Sellers says the Tuckers will never want another fight as long as they live," Holly said. "The community will be ready to help them keep to that idear, I expect. Folk're gonna be right itchy to side with the professor, after today. Only wish I could of seen it."

But Mrs. Ellis was still staring up at Bowie Jones as if she might be searching out the heart of her own son. She said softly, "What did they—why had you been sent to a place like that, Bowie?".

"For stealing, I'm ashamed to say," Bowie replied. "It started by cheating in school, then stealing stuff from the stores. I've got to teach Orvie Tucker that cheating's bad—if I can get that over with him, something might be made out of that boy, in spite of Bog and Dutch."

Holly coughed. "You made a fair start, teaching Orvie. I wouldn't be surprised if he shuns cheatin' from now on like Bog shuns soap and water."

"There's some apple pie in the cupboard," Mrs. Ellis said, poking futilely at the needle eye.

"If you hadn't offered it," Bowie Jones said as he headed for the kitchen, "I'd have stolen a slice—your pie's one thing that justifies theft." He took a big breath of the good light air deep down into his lungs and gingerly touched his swollen eye with his swollen right fingers and went inside, already smelling the apple pie. ★ ★ ★

The buffalo—the American Bison, that is—is the only animal, by the way, that turns its head to face rain, sleet or snow. Its shaggy coat of hair, covering head, neck, and shoulders, protects the rest of the body from the elements.

BUTTE BONANZA

By

Dave Sands

IN Butte, Montana, when the copper mines opened up, more and more girls arrived to help entertain miners on week-ends.

These sporting girls at first worked in the saloons, taking their friends home with them. Then so many crowded the city that a colony was organized in one-room shacks along Galena Street.

On the north side were saloons, music halls, dance halls and gambling joints. On the other more than a hundred girls had what their generation called cribs.

These cribs consisted of one room, sparsely furnished, bearing the name of the occupant over the door. Inside was a bed in one corner, in another a stove.

At one time around one thousand girls were quartered in the district. Came, as might be expected, a reform wave, and the doors on Galena Street were nailed up.

With the cooperation of their friends business went on as usual. With the front doors boarded up, a rear door was opened. Sidewalks were laid and the men instead of merely crossing from one side of Galena Street to the other for the companionship of the ladies now had to walk around the block.

These shacks catered to the general run of miners. But in time, deluxe establishments, hovered over by steely-eyed madams, with colored cooks and Chinese servants were provided for the growing number of millionaires. In their heyday, at least a dozen of these parlor houses flourished.

Outstanding and typical was that of one Lou Harpell who advertised in theatre and race track programs that in her establishment were "the most beautiful girls in the world."

The men, rough and otherwise, appreciated the hospitality of both shack and parlor house. On Saturday nights as many as three thousand would mill around the district looking for their favorites.

Like the men, many of these girls came to Butte to make a stake and then retired and went home to buy into some legitimate business.

They had a strict code of their own. They never went into bars or saloons up town. If they went shopping, they behaved discreetly. And as one admiring contemporary wrote in the Eighties, they were honest hard-working girls. And some wore more clothes sitting in their doorways than other women did on the streets. Only one thing gave them away, winds up this commentator. They were the only women in town ever seen smoking cigarettes ★ ★ ★

Lair of the Lost

By
Dan Kirby

Everything lovely Rosemary had was Johnny's for the taking . . . until the day he took off his gun—when he'd been told to wear it!

IF HE hadn't been worrying about those cloud banks in the north, and if he hadn't been mentally cussing Walt Slade, the hay contractor, Johnny McDaniels might have noticed the girl. But the way it was he walked up to the counter in Hammer's General Store and said, "Sis, gimme a sack of Duke's and a pair of them canvas gloves," and he never really saw her at all.

The general store was housed in a big square frame building with a partition wall built through the center of it, and on the other side of that wall was Red Durdin's Saloon. There was an open double door connecting the saloon with the general store and Johnny took the tobacco and gloves from the girl, paid her and headed through the doorway for the bar. If someone had of asked him later whether the girl was blonde or brunette or whether her eyes were blue or brown, he would have truthfully said, "Hell, I ain't sure it was a girl!"

This wasn't too uncommon, though, because Johnny McDaniels, in spite of the fact that he was a year shy of voting age, was top trouble man for old Buff Andrews' Rafter A outfit down around Fort Griffen and he had things on his mind. What with the fall rains coming on and old Buff screaming his lungs out because he hadn't received a single pound of the two hundred tons of prairie hay he had on order, Johnny could smell a heap of trouble coming.

He moved up to the bar and nodded at the bartender, a tall, solemn-faced man with a fringe of red hair making a semi-circle around his bald head. Johnny said, "Gimme a beer." and turned and surveyed the room, noting particularly the half dozen men in blue overalls and square-toed shoes sitting at two of the back tables. There were a couple of women with them, heavily-painted, brassy-voiced women, and Johnny judged they were fixtures of the saloon.

He looked around for his beer and not finding it, moved down the bar to where the bartender stood puffing a cigar and staring out the window.

Johnny said again, "Gimme a beer."

The solemn-faced man put the cigar down slowly. "Son," he said gently, "I only serve grown men at this bar. A peculiarity of mine."

Johnny eyed the man. "When I'm thirsty I drink beer. That's a peculiarity of mine."

The bartender opened his mouth, then noticed the flat stare of Johnny's gray eyes, took in the hundred sixty pounds of saddle toughened muscle and the .45 riding low on Johnny's thigh, and he shook his head.

"Never was worth a damn at guessing a man's age," he said, and drew the beer.

Johnny picked up the glass mug and cupped the coolness of it in his hands thinking, If you get what you want you got to

act tough, talk tough and be tough. That's something my old man never learned.

He said, "I'm lookin' for Walt Slade."

The bartender jerked a thumb toward the rear of the room. "That's his crew back there at the tables. Just finished cutting on Dutcher Flats and come in around noon. Reckon Walt will drop by pretty quick now."

Johnny nodded. "Obliged. I'll wait." And it was then he heard the thin, stifled scream in Hammer's General Store. He jerked his head around toward the doorway in the partition wall just as a big, wide-shouldered man stumbled into the room. The man had the girl by the arm, half pushing, half pulling her into the saloon.

Suddenly the pain was gone from his head and he felt pretty good

THE girl was young, maybe nineteen, Johnny judged, and her dress was, of course, linsey cloth but well cut and fitted and Johnny could see that she was slim with a hint of fullness in the bosom. Her hair was long and worn braided and pinned up behind her head. It was the blackest hair Johnny guessed he'd ever seen.

He noticed all this as he saw the girl pulling and struggling to free herself from the big man's grasp, and heard her say in a sort of low, pleading voice, "Please, Mr. Horne, please."

The big man wore a doeskin shirt, fringed along the pockets and sleeves. His hair was blond, worn long and tied back—and he was drunk. Johnny could tell he was drunk by the bright, glassy stare in his blood-shot eyes and the way he weaved as he pulled against the girl's slight weight. Not dead drunk, but at that stage where some men hang between being jovial and being mean.

The big man grinned loosely at the bartender. "Red," he said thickly, "I been thinkin' a long time this filly is wastin' herself working on the other side there. Me, I'm tired of seeing the same old faces in here. Hammer don't need her. Everybody knows that. Whyn't you put her to work?"

The bartender wiped his hands nervously on his apron and grinned in a sort of conciliatory manner. "Now, Ed, it's up to the gal, I reckon. The job's here if she wants it."

The girl's face was flushed. She held her head down to cover her embarrassment and she said again. "Please, Mr Horne. Let me go now."

One of the women with the hay crew laughed jarringly. "For a man crowding thirty-five, Big Ed sure likes 'em young."

The girl raised her head just a trifle then and Johnny saw the tears welling up in her eyes and all of a sudden he didn't like the big, blond man worth a damn.

He said evenly, but loud enough so that it carried over the room. "Quit making a jackass out of yourself and let the girl go."

It got real quiet then. The talk back at the tables ceased abruptly and the loose-lipped grin on Horne's face sort of froze there and then faded slowly as he swung around to face Johnny, still hanging on to the girl's arm.

He looked at Johnny like he wasn't sure he'd heard right. "Were you talkin' to me, kid?"

Johnny set down his beer. "You gonna turn her loose or am I gonna knock you loose?"

Big Ed Horne sort of rocked back on his heels as if Johnny had slugged him. He blinked and his face turned red, then drained white with cold, killing anger. He dropped the girl's arm, bellowed like a wounded bull and dove into Johnny, swinging his big fists like giant battering rams.

But Johnny had figured he'd do just that so he moved quickly aside and away from the bar as he rushed and Horne, half blinded by anger and too much whiskey, crashed against the bar. He whirled swiftly to face Johnny and turned just in time to catch Johnny's hard left, thrown with all his weight behind it, flush in the mouth.

The punch slammed Horne back into the bar again and Johnny moved quickly, coolly now, calling on a clear head and his experience from fifty-odd rough-and-tumbles to offset Horne's height and weight. He chopped a right to Horne's ear, and bounced another short, hooking left off Horne's jaw. Then he gave him the knee.

Horne moaned and his face turned yellow. He tried to push Johnny away but Johnny aimed to finish this quick. He seized the man's long hair in both hands and pounded his head on the bar three or four times, then, holding on to the hair with one hand, he reached out for the beer mug, broke it sharply against the bar and brought the jagged edge up close to Horne's throat, still holding him bent back across the bar by the hair.

Johnny said softly, "Now tell her you're sorry."

There was blood trickling down Horne's mouth from his smashed lips, blood oozing down his cheek from a ripped eyebrow, and blood in his eye as he glared at Johnny.

Horne said hoarsely, "Damn you, kid. I'll kill you for this."

Johnny brought the jagged edge of the mug closer to Horne's throat. "Tell her," he said, and Horne, noting the dead flatness of Johnny's voice, looked into the cold pale eyes boring into his own and knew suddenly that here was a man who would just as soon hurry him off to hell.

Horne said, "Cripes, I was just funnin' with Rosemary." He rolled his eyes toward the girl. "I'm sorry, girlie."

Johnny stepped back, still holding on to the beer mug. Horne straightened off the bar, felt his face gingerly with a hand, then looked at Johnny. "All right, kid," he said thickly. "I'm drunk and you bested me. That's all right. I'll be sober tomorrow and I'll be here around six o'clock—packing a gun."

Johnny said, "I'm your huckleberry, mister," and watched as the big man weaved his way across the room and out the swinging doors into the street.

It wasn't until he turned around that he noticed the girl was still there. She was just standing there staring at him like there wasn't anybody else in the room, and then she moved up closer and said, "Thanks, thanks an awful lot," and there was a kind of husky, trembly quality in her voice that put butterflies in Johnny's stomach. The butterflies were still there after she left to go back into Hammer's store.

THE bartender drew a beer and set it before Johnny. "I enjoyed that, son. Horne's had it coming a long time, but like he says, he'll be sober tomorrow. I never saw anyone who could beat Horne with a sixgun when he's off the whiskey, and I seen three try so far."

Johnny grinned and picked up the beer. "Rosemary who?"

The bartender blinked, then shrugged. "Rosemary Hill. Her pa wasn't no account. Died with a belly full of rotgut and the kid had to borrow money from Hammer to get him buried. She stays with Hammer and his old woman but I hear she's worked out her debt now and Hammer's going to let her go." He paused and glanced toward the two women sitting back with the hay crew. "I could use her myself. Business is business. Still, I don't know, sort of hate to see her get into this."

Johnny thought, Her old man was no good either. I wonder was he yellow, too? He said, "What's keepin' Slade?" then turned as the batwings opened and two men walked in.

The bartender said quietly, "The little one, that's Slade."

Johnny sipped his beer and let his eyes drift over the two men who were moving on back to the hay crew's tables. The little man, Walt Slade, wore a black, store-bought suit, and fancy hand-stitched boots; a big, black hat that would cost a puncher his month's pay was pushed back at a cocky angle on Slade's head.

Johnny thought, There must be a hell of a lot of money in cutting hay, and then felt a cool breeze fan his back as he turned his glance on Slade's companion, a squat, swarthy man wearing a beaded buckskin vest and two long-barreled .44s tied low around his thick thighs.

Johnny turned his back on the two men and said quietly over his beer, "That two-gun gent is Tonkawa Jim Owens. Seen him in Fort Griffen once. Ain't he kind of fast company for Slade?"

The bartender gave Johnny a warning glance, looked quickly toward Slade and the swarthy gunman, then picked up his cigar and moved off toward the far end of the bar without answering.

Johnny heard Slade say, "Jones, you might as well move camp out to the Clear

Fork this afternoon. With luck we'll get in two weeks cutting on the bottoms before the rains set in. I got the wagons moving out to Dutcher Flats now. They'll be hauling to the Double H for the next ten days."

Johnny set down his beer and turned around. He said evenly, "That Dutcher Flats hay goes to Fort Griffen."

Walt Slade wheeled around, looking at Johnny. "What's that?"

Johnny pulled a letter from his shirt pocket. "It says here that the Rafter A gets two hundred tons of hay delivered off Dutcher Flats at six dollars a ton on or before the first of September. I see your name signed to it. You're about out of time, Slade."

SLADE'S face reddened. He looked at the swarthy man beside him and they both moved up toward Johnny, stopping just in front of him. Tonkawa Jim Owens was grinning.

Slade said, "Who the hell are you, kid?"

Johnny looked at Slade, then at the squat gunman whose hands were thumb-hooked in his gunbelts. He eased himself off the bar a little and said, "I work for Buff Andrews. I got orders to see that hay delivered. If you're short-handed I'll help load. Buff don't aim to be caught short like he was last winter."

Slade said, "Let me see that letter, kid," and when Johnny handed it over the little man glanced at it casually and then slowly tore it to pieces and dropped them on the floor.

He smiled at Johnny. "Hay's mighty scarce this year, kid. Tell Buff it'll cost him seven-fifty a ton and if the rain starts early he won't get it at that."

Johnny slipped a glance toward the hay crew. They still sat there, but they were quiet, watching the play at the bar. The grin on Tonkawa Jim's dark face broadened, but his eyes were cold on Johnny.

Johnny eyed Slade, grinning. "Now pick up them pieces and put them together again."

Slade laughed but the hay crew remained silent. So did Tonkawa Jim Owens. Slade half turned to walk off.

Johnny said quietly, "I meant it, Slade."

A brief uncertainty crept into Slade's eyes and then was gone. He frowned at Johnny. "Look, kid, just tell Buff what I said. No call for you to get hurt."

Johnny said flatly, "Pick 'em up or go for your gun. I won't ask you again."

Slade hesitated, then shrugged and nodded at the squat gunman. Tonkawa Jim Owens was fast. His hands fell from the gunbelts and dropped easily to the guns tied low on his thighs in a single swift flow of movement. And Johnny, who had been looking for this, made his own draw. Even with the half-breed gunman starting first Johnny was clearing leather ahead of him. He felt the .45 sliding free of the holster and then as he swung it up his sleeve caught on the stiff leather tip of his belt that had slipped clear of the buckle during his fight with Big Ed Horne.

The belt tip hung for just the barest fraction of a second and then the momentum of Johnny's upswinging forearm pulled the sleeve free and Johnny thumbed off a fast shot even as the squat gunman was pulling the trigger on his own gun. Johnny heard the vicious drone of the slug cutting past his ear and at the same time saw the gunman teeter up on his toes, a red stain over his shirt pocket. Tonkawa Jim Owens hung poised there for just a moment, looking at Johnny and not seeing him. Then he pitched forward on his face.

WALT SLADE looked at the gunman stretched out there on the floor and then at Johnny and fear was naked in his eyes. He backed slowly across the room toward the hay crew.

"Jones," he said shakily, "you boys work for me."

Jones, a big, barrel-chested man, kicked

back his chair and stood up. "We cut yore hay, Slade. You ain't payin' us to buy into this fracas." He jerked a thumb toward the rest of the crew and they moved across the room behind him and out the door.

Johnny said, "Now pick up the pieces of that letter and we'll see can you borrow some paste from the store next door."

Slade didn't need to be told again. He knelt down and started scooping up the torn paper, almost frantic in his haste.

The bartender said, "I'll clear you with the marshal, son. You're fast all right. But if that had been Big Ed Horne it would have gone the other way."

Johnny stuck the tip of his belt back under the buckle. "Don't bet no money on that, friend." Then seeing that Slade had finished picking up the torn letter, he slipped his gun into its holster and, taking Slade by the arm, marched him through the big double door into the general store.

Rosemary Hill was behind the counter when they walked in and she blushed when she saw Johnny, and then smiled at him, and looking at her there with the color high in her cheeks, Johnny thought she was about the prettiest thing he'd ever seen.

He said, "Mr. Slade here tore up an important letter by mistake and he needs to borrow some paste."

Rosemary said, "Oh, that's a shame, but I think I can fix it all right." She tore off a piece of brown wrapping paper and took down a pot of mucilage from a shelf behind the counter and then reached for the pieces of paper that Slade held cupped in his hands.

Johnny said, "He wants to piece it together himself. Mighty important letter."

Slade glared at Johnny, but took the paper and mucilage and moved off down the counter. Johnny all of a sudden realized that he was practically alone with Rosemary Hill.

She said softly, "I want to thank you again for what you did."

Johnny said, "It wasn't nothin'."

She looked at him. "That shooting in there—I was afraid to look."

He said, "It wasn't nothin' either," and all of a sudden he felt awkward and ill at ease and wished he could think of something to say to this girl.

Finally Rosemary said, "You're new around here. Are you going to be here long?"

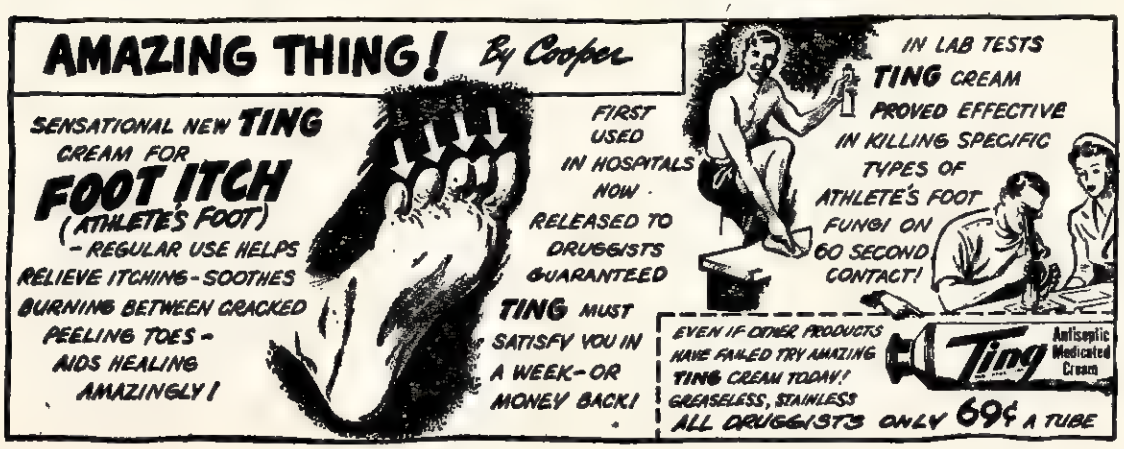
Johnny thought, Hell, why not? I won't get nowhere just standing around. He said, "I got about ten days here. Staying at the hotel, and there ain't nothing as lonesome as a hotel room at night."

He looked level at her. "If I can get a surrey over at the stable could you go out for a ride tonight?"

The girl lowered her eyes. "Why,—I don't know, Mr.—"

"Johnny" he said hurriedly, "Johnny McDaniels."

"I have some sewing for Mrs. Hammer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that I should do tonight, Johnny, I don't see how—"

"Well," he said glumly, "If you don't want to go—"

She looked at him, smiling. "But I do want to go, Johnny." She paused a moment, then shrugged, "And I will. I can do that sewing tomorrow night."

Walt Slade walked up and handed Johnny the patched up letter. "You satisfied now?"

Johnny folded the letter carefully and put it in his shirt pocket. "You want to ride out to Dutcher Flats with me and tell them teamsters to head that hay toward Fort Griffen?"

It was an order, the way he said it, and the little man looked at him and then at the gun holstered on his thigh and he nodded. "Whatever you say, kid."

Johnny grinned at Rosemary. "I'll be by Hammer's house at seven o'clock."

HE WAS there ten minutes early. He'd come in off the flats around five o'clock and got himself barbered and the horse smell washed off him and he'd found a clean shirt in his warbag. After these preparations, he'd spent some fifteen minutes haggling over the rental of the surrey and a black harness mare. He'd bolted down a quick meal, and then killed thirty minutes cruising aimlessly around town on foot. When he couldn't stand it any longer he got in the surrey and took off for Hammer's house on the south edge of town. She was already on the porch, waiting for him.

She moved off the porch toward the gate as he pulled up and he noticed that she was wearing her hair long and tied back with a blue ribbon. She looked soft and young and very beautiful in the cool light of evening, and the sight of her made Johnny suck in his breath. The butterflies were bothering his stomach again. He didn't even notice that she wore the same old linsey-cloth dress.

He stepped down from the surrey and opened the gate for her and then helped her into the surrey's leather covered seat.

She smiled at him. "You're early."

He nodded. "Just gives us that much more time together."

He started the mare off down the street, heading out the road toward Dutchers Flats because he remembered a little valley just this side of the flats with a creek mandering through it and big cottonwoods towering against the sky and somehow the place had reminded him of Rosemary when he passed it this afternoon.

THEY rode in a kind of embarrassed silence until they were about a half mile out of town. Then Rosemary said quietly, "Mrs. Hammer didn't want me to do this. She said it wasn't proper."

Johnny thought about that. "Then why did you?"

"Because I wanted to."

The firmness in her voice sent a warm glow through Johnny and all of a sudden he was talking—about himself, his job with old Buff Andrews, and how he was buying a heifer cow each month with half his pay and about the nine hundred odd acres he had under lease north of Fort Griffen. There wasn't any house on the land yet but after fall roundup Buff would give him time off and he'd build one.

Then he started telling her about his folks and how his ma cooked the best fried apple pies in all of Texas and how she was anxious for him to build up his spread and find himself a girl and settle down. And then, just as he was about to mention his dad, he caught himself and clammed up. One minute he was feeling all warm and good inside and now he was cold and bitter with the old bleakness upon him. It was like somebody had opened up an old wound on him and drained off the warmth. That's how it was whenever he thought about his dad.

Rosemary said quietly, "What about

your dad, Johnny. You haven't mentioned him."

Johnny's voice was harsh. "What can you say about a man who's yellow?"

THE bluntness of his words, the faint tremble of anger in his voice, caused her to look at him sharply. "Why, Johnny! That's a terrible thing to say."

"All right," he said bitterly, "I'll tell you about my dad. He runs a saddle shop in Fort Griffen. He and ma live in a couple of rooms behind the shop, and they don't live very high on the hog. It's been plain hell on ma, I reckon, though she never complained. She was a ranch woman, liked the smell of sage coming in off the prairie of a morning, liked to stand there in her kitchen of an evening and watch the sun go down on the plains. Pa had a good ranch eight years ago, but he didn't have guts enough to keep it. It was either fight or sell out so he sold and moved to town."

Rosemary's hand touched his shoulder. "Johnny, you can't be sure about that. Eight years ago is a long time. You weren't very old then and you can't be certain there wasn't other reasons for your dad selling out."

Johnny shrugged. "When you see a thing with your own eyes, then hear it talked all over town, you don't forget it. I saw it happen. This gent, Solly Gibbins, had moved a herd out near Dad's range and he started crowding us right off. I thought any day pa was going to call his bluff but it never happened. Then, when Solly threw an earth dam across the creek that stopped the summer flow of water on our range I knew pa had to call him or quit. He knew it, too. I was in town with pa when he ran onto Solly and crawled him about that dam. Solly just laughed at him. I thought for sure pa was going to draw on him. He looked mad enough to have killed him barehanded. Then, all of a sudden, pa just turned and walked off and we sold out that fall."

Johnny looked at her. "You asked me and I told you. It's something I can't seem to get out of my mind. Everybody was talking about pa being yellow then, though it's mostly died out now. But when I started to school there in town it was pretty rough. Everytime some kid opened his mouth about pa being yellow I fought him. If I didn't whip him the first time I fought him until I did. I whipped nearly every kid in school and every time I did I told pa about it. I made sure he knew there was one McDaniels who wasn't yellow."

Rosemary's arm encircled his own and her hand lay soft and cool upon his wrist. "Maybe you're too hard on him, Johnny. All men aren't made alike."

Johnny shook his head. "All I know is nobody will ever call me yellow. Anybody pushes me, I push back." But riding there with the moon casting soft shadows over the trail and Rosemary close beside him, Johnny felt the old hurt and bitterness slipping away. He'd carried this inside him for eight years but just talking to her had helped. A man sometimes needed someone to listen to him.

Three hours later when they pulled up in front of Hammer's big house, they weren't strangers anymore. Once, while they were sitting under the cottonwoods, Johnny had gotten up gumption enough to kiss her. He had been sort of afraid to do it, but he just plain couldn't help it. She didn't get mad at him, either.

HE GOT down from the surrey and helped her to the ground and they stood there by the gate with lots of things to say and not knowing how to say them.

Then Johnny said, "I heard today that your job with Hammer was playing out. What you figure on doing?"

For a moment she just looked at him and he thought that maybe she wouldn't answer. He said quietly, "If you're thinkin' it's none of my business, I'm makin' it mine."

She smiled. "I was just thinking how I've changed, Johnny. Yesterday all I could think to do when Hammer lets me go was crawl off somewhere and die. I was scared. Well, I'm not scared, anymore, Johnny. I've been hungry but I won't ever be again, if I can help it. I'll take that job in Durdin's Saloon, if that's all I can get, and I'll make out all right."

She stood there, straight and slim, with the moon striking soft lights from her hair and bathing her in its mellow glow, and all of a sudden his arms were tight around her and he kissed her hard, feeling her lips warm and yielding under his own.

He said gruffly, "No girl of mine works in any saloon," and when he walked off to the surrey his legs were weak and trembly.

* * *

He was out on Dutchers Flats at dawn and he got himself a hay fork and pitched hay all morning. All the time he worked, he thought about Rosemary and what might happen to her in a place like Durdin's Saloon. When noon rolled around he was strung up as tight as a longhorn in a lightning storm. He withdrew from the boisterously friendly noise of the teamsters' lunch hour, and stretched out under the lacy shade of a mesquite. When he went back to work, his mind was made up, and he took off about three o'clock and rode into town.

He took his roan over to the stable and then went to his room and wrote a short letter to his mother, sealed it, and stuck it in his hip pocket. After that, he went to the Butterfield Station and bought a one-way ticket on the stage to Fort Griffen. He was just leaving the station when someone called his name and he turned to see a grizzled oldster leaning against the wall of the building in the shade of the wooden awning. He recognized the man as one who had been in Durdin's Saloon yesterday.

The oldster grinned at him. "If you're aimin' to ride that stage out of town before Big Ed catches up with you, you're a mite late, kid. He's in town now and plumb sober."

For a moment the oldster's words froze Johnny in his tracks. He'd clean forgot about Big Ed Horne. All he'd had time to think about all day was Rosemary Hill, and how he was going to fix it so she wouldn't have to work in Durdin's Saloon.

He said, "Where is he now?"

The old man jerked a thumb down the street. "Hanging around the saloon, last I seen him. He's waiting for you, kid."

Johnny's eyes swept the length of the street and settled on the big sign that read HAMMERS GENERAL STORE. He thought, There's no guarantee he won't beat me. And if he does, what'll happen to her?

All of a sudden he was remembering the gunfight with Tonkawa Jim Owens and how his sleeve had caught on the belt tip. Some little thing like that could happen anytime. A split second lost and with it Rosemary's happiness. His hands were cold and moist and he wiped them on his pants. If he ducked this fight with Horne, he'd never live it down, but he had to get Rosemary on that stage and on her way to his ma's, first. A man might risk his own life on any damn fool thing he pleased, but he couldn't risk the life of the woman he loved. And for Rosemary Hill, working in Durdin's Saloon, could well be worse than death for her.

The oldster said, "What's the matter, kid? You look sick."

Johnny didn't answer. He walked back into the station. He unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on a nail in the wall, then looked at the agent. "I'm checking this a spell," he said, and moved back out onto the street, feeling naked without the weight of the .45 riding on his thigh.

He stared toward Hammers' store, thinking, If I can talk her into this and get her

on the stage, then it won't matter. And it was then that Big Ed Horne walked out of the saloon. The big man stood there a moment on the saloon porch, and then the sweep of his glance caught up with Johnny, and Horne seemed to stiffen, then relax. He stepped off the porch into the street, facing Johnny.

Johnny called, "Hold it, Horne. I'm not wearing a gun," and he saw the slow, contemptuous grin spread over the blond man's face.

Big Ed Horne laughed shortly. "I had you figured for a punk, yellow kid. This ain't the same as jumpin' a man when he's drunk, is it?" He drew his own gun then and walked toward Johnny, and when he was within reaching distance he swung the gun in a sharp, vicious arc, and the barrel crashed against Johnny's head, driving him to his knees.

Johnny felt the pain burst in his head, and his hand went instinctively to where his gun ought to have been, as he fought the red fog that threatened to engulf him.

Horne said, "Get up. I want to show this to the boys," and his booted foot slammed into Johnny's back. Johnny lurched to his feet and Horne jammed the gun against his spine and grabbed him by the collar and forced him up on the saloon porch, then half shoved, half threw him through the swinging doors.

THERE were maybe a dozen men inside the saloon, some of whom had seen the fight yesterday, and they were facing the door now as Johnny came stumbling into the room. They saw the ugly, red gash on Johnny's temple and Big Ed Horne grinning behind him, and Johnny knew what they were thinking.

Horne said, "He says he ain't packing a gun," and then he started laughing and the others were laughing with him and Johnny stood there with his back to the bar, feeling sick at his stomach and wishing bitterly that he had his gun.

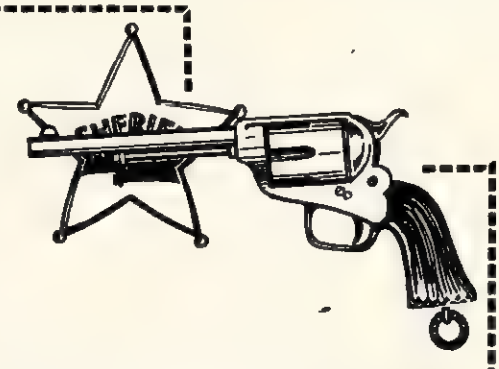
Horne stopped laughing. "I'm gonna teach you not to ever start nothin' you ain't got the guts to back up, kid." And he moved forward and chopped the gun down across Johnny's head again. The blow made his knees sag and he staggered away from the bar. Twice more the gun slammed into his face and head and then he was down on the floor, not feeling anything.

It was the sound of voices that first

DEATH FANS THIS GUN!

Gunslinger Will Kostka wanted a silver star to wear against the threats of his enemies . . . but all the vengeful men of Blanco county offered him was—a crimson badge!

By LEWIS B. PATTEN



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penetrated his pain-fogged mind. The words came to him, sharp and clear.

"He come in yesterday like he was a real tough man, but Big Ed sure pulled him off his high horse today."

And then there was the bartender saying, "I never figured he'd beat Horne but I never figured he'd back off, either. Sure beats hell how a man can fool you, sometimes."

He lay there, not stirring, trying to close his mind to the talk, and it was then he was conscious of the soft arms cradling his head and the wet cloth pressed against his forehead. He looked up into the tear-stained face of Rosemary Hill.

He thought bitterly, She saw me take that pistol whipping. Then he rolled up on an elbow and held himself there a moment until the room stopped spinning and he rose unsteadily to his feet.

Rosemary took his arm and braced herself against him and helped him through the doorway, into the general store. She didn't say anything, but he could see that her face was pale, and the tears were still in her eyes.

He said, "I was coming up here to see you when he caught up with me." He reached in his pocket for the stage ticket and the letter he'd written his mother. "I did some thinking last night, and I figured maybe ma could line up something for you in Fort Griffen. She's pretty good at helping folks."

He held out the ticket and letter but she made no move to take them. She just stood there with her eyes lowered and her back half turned to him and he could hear her stifled sobs.

SHE despised him now, he reckoned. After all the big talk he'd put out last night about nobody pushing him around, she'd seen him turn yellow. He said quietly, "There's no strings to this, Rosemary. I'll be up here another ten days gettin' this hay out. Ma will get you lined up.

She turned on him then. "You hate me, don't you, Johnny?"

He blinked. "Me? Why no—"

"I know you do," she sobbed. "I'm the cause of all this. I know why you didn't let Ed Horne draw you into a gunfight. You were worrying about what would happen to me. And now the whole town thinks you're a coward and it's my fault and you hate me for it."

Suddenly the pain was gone from his head and he felt pretty good.

He said, "You don't think I'm yellow?"

She looked at him as though he were out of his mind. "Yellow, Johnny? You're the bravest man I ever met. What you did took real nerve."

He said, "Well, I'm damned," and the way things were stacking up, he didn't care if the whole town did think he was yellow. She was what counted.

He said, "I wish Dad could have heard you say that." It was then it struck him. He stood there thinking about it. Funny that in all these years Ma had never once said a word against Dad. Never let on at all that the talk around town bothered her.

He looked at Rosemary. "You don't reckon he—"

She smiled at him. "That he made the same decision then that you made today? I thought about it last night, Johnny. He was all your mother and you had. He couldn't take a chance with your future. I said you were the bravest man I'd ever met, but I've never met your dad."

He thought, All these years he must have known what I thought but he never said a word. Never tried to shift the blame on Ma and me. But there's still time to make it up to him.

Rosemary took the ticket and letter out of his hand and then looked straight at him. "Johnny, I don't want these—unless the strings go with them."

He kissed her then. "Girl," he said solemnly, "consider yourself plumb hog-tied." ★ ★ ★

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Queen of Hidden Valley

The sergeant's orders were: Get the settlers out—or stay and die with them!

THERE seemed to be no end to the canyon. The castellated walls, in fantastic shades of red and brown, stippled with the dusty green of scrub trees and brush, towered above the patrol. The heat of the Arizona day filled the canyon like a thick issue blanket. Sergeant Hayes Browning thrust up an arm and brought the eight troopers behind him to a dusty

By Gordon D. Shirreffs

Jeanne was cleansing Cunningham's wound when Hayes entered the house

halt. Browning swung down from his bay and eased his belt as he looked ahead, through the heat haze, to where the canyon floor slanted down toward the south. Without Lieutenant Shafter's map he could not orient himself.

Corporal Dennis Donnelly led his weary bay up to Hayes. "And where the hell are we, Hayes?" he asked.

Hayes glanced back at the troopers, squatting in the shade of their horses. He spoke in a low voice. "I wish I could say, Denny. Somewhere near Alkali Creek, I'd say."

"Yeah. *Somewhere.*"

"Shut up! I don't want the men to know we're lost."

Donnelly shoved back his sweat-soaked campaign hat. "I think they know, me boy. You're not dealing with recruits."

Hayes cut a chew and passed the battered plug to the Irishman. "The best we can do is follow the canyon."

"Aye! What else can we do? We've been in here two days now. No water since yesterday afternoon. The canteens are dry and the horses even drier."

Hayes took his carbine from his saddle and slapped Donnelly on the shoulder. Dust puffed from the corporal's faded issue shirt. "I'll walk ahead to that rock shoulder and take a look-see. Want to come along?"

Donnelly got his carbine and padded after Hayes. Hayes felt the heat rise up through his boots from the rocky floor of the canyon. Lieutenant Shafter had died quickly with a flint arrowhead lodged in his skull. None of the men had seen the Tonto who had loosed the shaft. Shafter had fallen down a decline. By the time Hayes had reached the body, hidden from view by rocks, it had been mutilated and the skull smashed in. His handgun and personal effects had vanished. Worst of all, his mapcase had been taken too.

Shafter had been one of those officers who never took an enlisted man into his confidence. The orders had been to find a party of homesteaders who had foolishly entered Tonto country in defiance of army orders. Shafter had been sent to turn them back. Hayes had no idea of the coordinates where the homesteaders were supposed to be. He was five days away from Fort Apache and provisions were low. The men were unusually quiet.

Donnelly scrambled up on the rock shoulder and stared to the south. "For the love av Heaven," he said incredulously. Hayes reached his side. Greenery met his gaze. The sun sparkled on a swiftly-moving stream, looped like a silver ribbon across a green carpet. He shook his head and closed his eyes. "Is it real, Hayes?" asked Donnelly.

Hayes slanted his hat brim low over his eyes. "Yes," he said quietly. "It's no mirage."

Donnelly gripped Hayes by the arm. "Look," he said excitedly, "'tis smoke, or I'm a Dutchman!"

A THREAD of hazy blue smoke wavered up from the far end of the valley only to be lost amongst the heights. A cold feeling came over Hayes despite the heat of the sun. "Tontos?" he asked.

Donnelly shrugged. "It's possible."

"We need water."

"We can stay in the canyon and go down there after dark."

Hayes rubbed his unshaven jaw. *"Bueno!"* As he turned he saw a movement high on the canyon wall. He blinked his eyes and looked again. He was sure he'd seen a head, thickly maned with black hair and bound by a strip of calico. He looked at Donnelly. The corporal had seen nothing. Hayes plodded back to the patrol. He had had a feeling, ever since they had buried Mister Shafter, that they had been followed by Apaches. He had seen nothing, but sixteen years on the frontier had developed a sixth sense of danger in him. There *were* Apaches somewhere near them.

The troopers looked up as Hayes grounded his carbine and eyed them. Hayes mentally called the roll. Cliff Sabin, Nick Orth, Dan Cunningham, Gus Kaiser, Joe Bentik, Mike Emilio and Trumpeter Jim Farber. Most of them were in their second hitch. Only Bentik had less than a year's service. "What's up, Sergeant Hayes?" asked Sabin.

"There's water ahead. Grazing for the horses."

Bentik got up quickly and wiped his mouth. "Let's go!" he said. He placed a foot in one of his stirrups.

"Sit down, Bentik," said Hayes.

Bentik flushed. "We ain't had water since yesterday, Sarge."

"Don't you think I realize that?"

Bentik spat dryly. "Well, let's get it."

"You will. When I'm ready to let you get it."

Bentik took his foot from the stirrup and looked at the other men as though seeking support. None of them moved. Hayes pointed down the canyon. "It looks good down there; too damned good. We'll wait until dark and scout ahead."

"Ain't no one here to bother us," said Bentik. "Let's go now."

Hayes gripped his carbine. Bentik was a loud-mouth and a trouble-maker. "Shut up, Bentik!" he said.

Some of them looked at Bentik as though he was their champion. Hayes wiped the sweat from his face. "Don't get any ideas that any of you are going down there until I say so. You belong to A Troop. Don't ever forget it."

"How *can* we, with you around," said Bentik softly.

Hayes was tempted to swing his carbine against the complaining trooper's thick skull, but the men were on edge and it wouldn't do to shove them too far. "Take the horses into that hollow over there. Orth, you go back up the canyon a bit and stand guard."

Orth swung up on his horse. "Against what?" he asked. All eyes turned toward him.

Hayes spat. "Damn it! Haven't you ever stood guard before? You want me to draw a picture for you? *Vamonos!*" As Hayes turned away he heard Bentik say, "Tontos, I'll bet. I don't like this, boys."

Kaiser spoke up. "Hell, you don't know a Tonto from a Pima," he said slowly.

Hayes walked back to where Donnelly was watching the valley. "See anything?" he asked.

Donnelly shook his head. "The smoke is gone. Wasn't a smoke signal I'll bet."

"Maybe we've found those homesteaders."

"Yeah," said Donnelly quietly, "if they haven't been found by the Tontos. Helluva place to make a home."

Hayes shifted his chew. "They got permission from the territorial government. Department raised hell, saying it was too dangerous in here. The homesteaders took off anyway."

"So what do we do if they are here?"

"Run 'em out."

Donnelly shook his head. "Trouble, trouble, always trouble. Sometimes I wish I had never left Boston, me boy."

Hayes grinned. "You'd have half a dozen kids and a nagging wife by now. You'd be wishing you were getting your issue grub and pay along with the trouble."

The Irishman nodded. "Yeah." He studied the valley. "Nice place."

"Maybe it's what I'm looking for."

"I thought you were a thirty-year man?"

Hayes shrugged. "I'll have twenty years in by next January."

Donnelly eyed Hayes. "By God, you musta been a young one when you enlisted."

Hayes rubbed his jaw. "I was a trumpeter with the old Third Dragoons when I was thirteen."

"Big for your age?"

Hayes nodded. "I used to shave whether I needed it or not." He eyed the valley. "I've often thought of a place like this. Good water and grazing. Protected in the winter. Far enough from civilization so a man can breathe freely."

Donnelly scratched himself. "Gawd, I stink," he said. "Getting so I can't stand myself, much less you."

"Yeah," said Hayes quietly. "This looks like the spot all right. Happy Valley."

"It might be *Hell* Valley if the Tontos are around," said the corporal dryly.

HAYES and Trooper Dan Cunningham walked toward the valley after dark. There would be a moon later on, but now the valley was pitchy dark. A cool wind blew up the canyon dispelling the heat of the day. Hayes shivered a little as the sweat dried on him. Twenty years of heat and cold, hunger and thirst. It was about time he thought of the future.

They could see the dim outline of the valley heights as they stopped at the first trace of greenery. Cunningham stared to the south. "I can smell the water," he whispered. "I'm liable to stampede, Sarge."

Hayes wet a finger and dampened his nostrils. He drew in the cool air through his nose and mouth. There was a feeling in him that he didn't like. Cunningham turned quickly, raising his carbine. Hayes gripped the trooper by the arm and they faded into the brush.

Slowly, over the smell of water and brush, he noticed another odor. Greasy and rancid as of filthy, long-used buckskins. The darkness thickened. A dim form appeared, looking toward the silent valley. The head was thickly maned with hair, bound by a strip of cloth. Cunningham's breath came in sharply. He moved, striking a stone with his foot. The Apache whirled and leaped toward them. Hayes met the rush with an upswing of his carbine. The steel-shod butt thudded against flesh. The warrior went down, fanging out with a knife. Cunningham grunted. Hayes side-stepped and smashed down with the carbine. There was a sound as though a melon had been dropped and the buck lay still. Hayes stepped back. Cunningham groaned. "Slashed my thigh," he whispered between set teeth. "Bleeding like a stuck hog, Sarge."

Hayes held his carbine ready and cautiously approached the warrior, expecting another knife slash. There was no need to worry. The Tonto was dead. Hayes dragged him into the brush. He ripped the trooper's trouser back from the slash and applied a tourniquet with his scarf. He bandaged the slash and tied the trouser tightly about the cloth. "Stay here," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I look around."

THE moon was rising when Hayes reached the water. He drank a little and filled his canteen. He froze as a yellow eye seemed to wink at him through the night. A lamp, shining through a window. He pushed through the willows bordering the stream and padded toward the light. The moon tipped the heights. Scattered along the base of a cliff he saw a dozen small buildings. Beyond them was a larger structure on a rise. A horse whinnied out of the darkness and a dog gave tongue as Hayes stopped amongst some trees. A door opened, outlining a man against the light. There was a rifle in his hands. The damned fool! He was a perfect target. Hayes called out. "The house! Can I come up there?"

"Who are you?"

"Sergeant Hayes Browning! Troop A of the Third Cavalry!"

"Come on up!"

"Put out that damned light or close that door!"

The door banged shut and the man came down the slope. He was a tall, spare man with a flowing beard. He bent his head forward and looked at Hayes. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I have eight men up the canyon. Can we get food here?"

"We have a little," the man said hesitantly. "Are you lost?"

"Yes."

"I'm looking for Stephen Duncan."

"I'm Stephen Duncan."

"I have orders, telegraphed from Department Headquarters at Whipple Barracks, about you and your company. You are to leave this area as soon as possible."

"I take no orders from the army, sir. I have permission from territorial authorities to take up this land."

"The Tontos won't like it, Mister Duncan."

"They haven't bothered us. We haven't seen any of them."

"You will," said Hayes dryly, "when they're ready to *let* you see them."

"Come up to the house." Duncan turned and plodded up the slope. He held

the door open and let Hayes in. Two women looked up from where they sat before a fire crackling in the fireplace. Another man leaned against a wall. Hayes eyed the women. One of them was gray-haired and spare; the other was yellow-haired and young. She was as neat as a pin and damned pretty. Hayes was suddenly conscious of the stink of his faded shirt and the horsey smell which clung to him like an aura. "My wife Sarah and my daughter Jeanne," said Duncan proudly, "Cort Barnes, one of my men. This is Sergeant Hayes Browning."

"What's he doing here?" asked Barnes suspiciously.

"He tells me that we must leave our valley."

"On whose orders?"

Hayes eyed the truculent man. Hard gray eyes met his. "The Department of Arizona," said Hayes.

"We don't take orders from the soldiers," said Barnes.

Hayes looked at Duncan. "I'm sorry, but I have my orders. You'll have to move."

Barnes sneered. "How many men do you have?"

"Eight."

The settler spat into the fire. He tapped the holstered pistol at his belt. "We've got twelve good men here and we *ain't* moving."

"How long do you think you'd hold out against the Tontos?"

Barnes grinned. He waved a hand. "That's the army for you," he said, "always stirring up trouble where there ain't no trouble. Tontos? Hell! We ain't seen hide nor hair of them."

Hayes raised his carbine. The light showed on the matted blood and hair on the butt. "*There's* some Tonto hair," he said. "I killed a buck not a mile from here. I saw another this afternoon not three miles from here. Mister Shafter, our officer, was killed by Tontos yesterday morning."

Barnes swaggered forward. "Working them up against us, are you? Killing a warrior in our valley. I got a good mind to get the boys together and run you and your men outa here."

"Don't try it," said Hayes quietly.

Stephen Duncan stepped between them. "Gentlemen! Please! We can talk this over like civilized men."

Sarah Duncan looked at Hayes. "There's blood on your hands," she said softly. "You are a man of blood."

Jeanne leaned forward. "*Mother!* He's only doing his duty."

Hayes bowed slightly. "Thank you, Miss Duncan." He turned to her father. "I'll get my men. We're badly in need of water and food. One of my men was slashed by the Tonto I killed. May I bring him in here?"

"Put him in the shed," said Cort Barnes.

Stephen Duncan came forward. "Bring your men up," he said, "my daughter has some skill as a nurse. She will attend the wounded man."

Hayes opened the door and stepped out. "We'll be right back." As he closed the door he heard Cort Barnes: "Stickin' their noses in here; stirring up trouble. That's like the soldiers, all right."

Hayes cursed to himself as he picked his way down the slope. The buildings looked as though they had been there longer than the time of the homesteaders. The large building looked like some kind of fortification. A *torreon* loomed above it. Spaniards had been in there many years ago. They had had enough sense to clear out, away from the predatory Tontos, and *they* hadn't been the kind of men who were easily scared off.

THE moon flooded the valley when Hayes led his patrol up to the settlement. Two of them carried Cunningham into Duncan's house. Dennis Donnelly eyed the settlement. "It's like sitting on the edge of hell looking down into the fire and brim-

stone," he said grimly. "These people addled, Hayes?"

Hayes shrugged. "You figure it out, sonny. Get guards out. Put the horses into that stone corral. We're going to have trouble moving these people, Dennis."

"We'll hammer their butts with carbine barrels," said the Irishman. "The sooner we get out of here the better. When can we start back to Apache?"

"Our orders are to escort them to Globe. Until we get there we're stuck with them. Make the best of it, you shamrock."

Jeanne Duncan was cleansing Cunningham's wound when Hayes entered the house. She rinsed out a cloth in a basin, turning the water pink. She looked up at Hayes. "It's a nasty slash," she said, "but he'll be all right. You didn't take much care with it."

Cunningham grinned. "The sergeant was busy at the time," he said, "ma'am, I've got enough knife and bullet scar tissue on this body to make a fine pair of boots. Don't you worry about me."

Jeanne bandaged the wound neatly and then washed her hands. She looked at Hayes. "Do you really mean to drive us from our valley?"

Hayes nodded. "I'm sorry. It is a fine place to homestead. I like it myself."

"Perhaps the army men want it for themselves," she said coolly.

Hayes smiled. "I doubt it. We aren't foolish enough to stake out a place right in the heart of Tonto country."

"Meaning that *we* are foolish, is that it?"

Hayes waved a hand. "Yes."

She turned on a heel and left the room, slamming the door behind her. Cunningham grinned. "You went over like a lead ballon," he said. "Cute squaw, that."

"Don't get any ideas, Cunningham. You're old enough to be her father."

"She's my nurse, ain't she?"

Hayes leaned close. "You make a pass at her and I'll boot your rump all the way back to Fort Apache, wound and all."

"All right, Sarge. You got any ideas yourself?"

Hayes shook his head. He rolled a cigarette for the trooper. "I've got enough troubles without fooling with a filly too."

Cunningham rolled his eyes as he accepted a light from Hayes. "But *what* a filly! Slender in the pasterns; smooth in the flank."

"Shut up! You act damned lively for a wounded man."

Cunningham waggled a finger. "I ain't *that* sick, Sarge. No, sir!"

Hayes grinned as he left the veteran trooper. He was damned glad Cunningham hadn't received a worse wound. Cunningham was an old-timer. He had been busted more times than he could keep track of because of his liking for *scoot-a-waboo,* but for all that he knew his business and had a cool head when the slugs were flying.

There was a group of four men beside the corral when Hayes left the house. Angry voices came to him as he approached the men. "You keep them damned horses out of that corral," said Cort Barnes. Corporal Donnelly thrust his chin forward. "I got my orders," he said. Barnes swung hard. His fist cracked against the trooper's chin. Donnelly went down. Gus Kaiser swung at Barnes but the other settler stepped in close and kicked him in the gut. Kaiser grunted and lurched forward in time to get a smashing blow on the back of his neck from Barnes. As Donnelly got up on his hands and knees, Barnes lashed out with his foot. The cruel spur raked across the Irishman's jaw. He rolled over, covering his face with his forearms, as Barnes laughed and stepped in close for another try. Hayes ran forward. He backhanded the strange man and gripped the shoulder of Barnes, whirling him about. His right fist smacked home, driving Barnes back against the stone wall of the corral. His head thudded against it. Hayes turned in time to see the first man drag out a Colt. He clamped a big hand on the

man's gun wrist, dragged him in close and drove in a jolting right that sent the man back on his rump without his handgun. Hayes jerked Donnelly to his feet. "Damn you!" he said, "I *told* you to keep out of trouble with these people."

"Listen to him," said Donnelly to no one in particular. "Me, keeping out of trouble? You think I started this?"

Hayes shoved the non-com back. Barnes stood up, wiping the blood from his mouth and chin. "I'll kill you for that, Browning," he said thickly.

"Get out of here before I turn my men loose on you."

The other settler stood up and reached for his gun. Hayes stepped on it. "I'll give it to Stephen Duncan," he said. "Now get!"

"Come on, Akers," said Barnes quietly, "this ain't the time."

The two settlers walked away from the corral. Kaiser got up and shook a fist. "I'll get that buzzard before I leave here," he said angrily.

Hayes shook his head. "You'll keep away from them, Gus. We'll have enough trouble without any more fighting. Wait until we get them to Globe. I'll give you a pass. You can look him up then and belt hell out of him."

"*If* we get them to Globe. We're going to have more trouble, Hayes. These settlers are a damned independent lot."

Hayes looked into the corral. There were only twelve horses in it. "Get our horses in there, Denny."

Gus Kaiser looked at Hayes. "Now why didn't they want us to put our mounts in here? There's plenty of room."

"You know how an Apache can steal a horse right from under a man's nose. Supposing we left our horses outside and the Apaches got them? We couldn't do much about seeing that these homesteaders left the valley, could we?"

"Yeah," said Gus, "I never thought of it that way."

HAYES inspected the men who were on guard. The rest of the men had bedded down in the large fort-like structure on the rise to the east of the houses. It was in bad shape, for the roof had fallen in in a number of places; there were gaping holes in the walls and the ground was covered with litter. The big gate sagged wearily on its hinges. "What was this place?" asked Trumpeter Jim Farber.

"Spanish or Mexican fort I'd say," said Hayes.

Mike Emilio looked up from where he was making his bed. "Yeah," he said, "there are some words carved into the gate post. Something about this place being the *presidio* for the local silver mines. Didn't know there were any silver mines around here, Sarge."

"I've heard of them. They were found in the 1700's, and worked for quite a while until the Apaches began to raid them. The miners held out and asked for a garrison. The soldiers even had a hard time. Then the mines flooded and they finally pulled out. Until Stephen Duncan led his party in here the place was abandoned. Mister Shafter told me Duncan had heard of the place from old records. Department Headquarters wasn't even sure where it was."

"So *we* end up having to come here," growled Bentik. "We ain't got enough men to put up any kind of a fight."

Hayes turned away. Bentik was right. Even if the settlers agreed to leave the valley it would not be an easy trip to Globe. The valley was beautiful, washed in silvery moonlight, but Hayes had a feeling he was being watched. A man could make a home there in time, when the Tonto menace was gone, but that time had not come as yet. The old fort could be rebuilt and garrioned to protect the valley, but the government wouldn't do it; the cost would be prohibitive. The Spaniards had built the fort because the government took the profits from the silver mines and had used peons, who were the same as slaves, to do

the mining. The Spaniards had been exploiters, not colonizers. Hayes walked down by the stream. The valley was big, but not big enough to support twelve men and their families. Two or three families might do well in there, but there were far too many of the settlers for them to make a go of it. Stephen Duncan was a dreamer. Hayes turned back toward the house. He might as well tell Duncan his orders for the march to Globe.

Duncan listened quietly as Hayes outlined his plans for the Globe trip. "We stand to lose much," he said softly, "we brought in supplies, seed, tools and domestic animals. We have rebuilt these old houses. It has cost us much time and money."

"You may be able to come back some day."

"Perhaps. Cort Barnes is determined to stay."

"He might stay here permanently—six feet under."

"He is a strong-willed man, Sergeant Browning. There will be trouble with him and his friends."

"There already has been. Barnes and a man named Akers tried to stop my men from putting their horses into the stone corral."

"Why should they do that? There's plenty of room."

"They might have wanted to see us lose our horses so that we couldn't escort you to Globe, but believe me, Mr. Duncan, we'll escort you there if we have to walk all the way."

"Yes, I believe you would, Sergeant Browning. I believe you would."

CHAPTER TWO

Valley of Death

IT WAS dawn when Hayes rolled out of his blankets, shivering in the cold air. There was a drive in him to get these people out of the valley. He left the old fort and strode down the slope, grinning as he heard Dennis Donnelly tongue-lash the men into reluctant life. Hayes eyed the sentry posts, almost without thinking, and then his eyes narrowed. Donnelly had posted three men. One at the corral, another outside the fort; the third had been posted amongst the settlers' buildings. Sabin was up at the Fort; Emilio was at the corral; there was no man visible amongst the houses.

Hayes stopped beside Mike Emilio. "Who was on guard down there?" he asked the trooper.

Emilio rubbed his jaw. "Joe Bentik, I think."

"Do you know where he went?"

"No."

"And you wouldn't tell me if you did know."

Emilio grinned. "Maybe with some of the other boys, Sergeant Browning, but not with that snowbird. I just haven't seen him, that's all."

"Did you see or hear anything during your guard?"

"No. Wait a minute! I thought I saw a man prowling around that shed back there, but I wasn't sure."

"Trooper? Settler? Apache?"

Emilio shrugged. "Too dark. I didn't want to leave the horses. I've seen men who walked after strangers like that and never did come back. Once at Fort Bowie a sentry on the corral followed a shadowy figure. Next morning the horses were gone and they found him with his throat cut from ear to ear."

Hayes walked down the slope. As he did so he saw a trooper walk around the side of the Duncan house and glance up at him. Joe Bentik. Hayes saw another man walk quickly behind another house. It was Cort Barnes. Hayes stopped near the truculent trooper. "Were you off your post, Bentik?" he asked.

"A man has to relieve himself!"

Hayes nodded. "Yes. But don't let me catch you off this post again, until you're properly relieved." There was no use trying to rawhide Bentik now. That could wait until they got back to Fort Apache. Right now Hayes had to keep his men in hand without too much trouble.

Jeanne Duncan was in the living room of the Duncan house when Hayes rapped at the door. "How is Cunningham?" he asked.

She tied a knot on a bundle of clothing and placed it with a pile of others. "He won't be able to ride," she said. She eyed Hayes. "You are still forcing us to go?"

"I have to," he said quietly. "Believe me, I don't like my orders any better than you do. I do know this: *if* you stay here some of you will die."

She nodded. "I've thought more about it. I'm sorry I was bitter about it last night."

Cunningham called from the back room. "Sarge! Can I talk to you?"

Hayes entered the little room. "Shut the door," said the wounded man. He beckoned Hayes close to the bed. "Where is Bentik?" he asked softly.

"On guard outside."

Cunningham raised his head. "I woke up before dawn this morning hearing voices just outside this window. It was Bentik and that hombre Barnes. I didn't catch everything they said but I do know this: Barnes is paying Bentik to make trouble for you—to stop you from making these people leave."

"So? Why would Barnes want to stay here with the Tontos on the warpath? The man is tough, I'll admit that, but not that big a fool. Did he say anything about *why* he wanted to stay?"

Cunningham shook his head. "All I know is that he promised Bentik plenty if he did as he was asked, with a promise of more to come."

"He doesn't seem to have that kind of money kicking around."

"No. Unless he figures on making it here, and that ain't very likely."

"No." Hayes rubbed his jaw. He looked out of the window at the quiet valley. It would be a long time before the settlers broke even in a place like that. It would take hard, unremitting toil and a great deal of time to make a go of it. There wouldn't be any money to throw around. "I'll send some of the boys over to get you, Dan, when we're ready to leave," he said. Jeanne Duncan was standing at the outer door. He stopped beside her. "How long has your father known Cort Barnes?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Not too long. Why?"

"Did your father know of this valley before he met Barnes?"

"No. Father had permission from the territorial government to take up land for services rendered during the war. He wanted to settle in the Gila River country but Cort Barnes joined the little company father was organizing and told him of this place. Father agreed to look at it. He and Barnes came in here some months ago and father was organizing and told him of this

"Then actually, your father is the only one who has a right to this valley."

"Yes. For the period it will take him to homestead it and get permanent possession. After that time he planned to sell plots of the valley at a token price, to those men who had agreed to come in here with him and help him settle it."

Hayes eyed the young woman. "Quite a humanitarian, isn't he?"

"Yes. He wanted a place where men could live together in peace and understanding. He believed he'd found it."

Hayes nodded. "In time he'll be able to come back here." He had a vision of Cort Barnes and the man named Akers living in peace and understanding with anyone. "Do Barnes or Akers have families?"

She shook her head. "Cort Barnes wants me to marry him in time. Akers lives alone."

"And the rest of the men?"

"All of them have families with the exception of Sam Kermit."

HAYES remembered seeing Kermit. An oldtimer, a typical prospector if Hayes had ever seen one. Definitely not the type to start homesteading. Men were gathering in front of the old houses farther down the slope. Barnes was talking to them. Hayes put on his campaign hat and left the house. "Dice Akers, Sam Kermit and me ain't leaving this country," said Barnes. "You men don't have to go either."

"I don't want any trouble with those soldiers," said a short man. "Besides, they have no axes to grind. If they say it's too dangerous in here, that's good enough for Carl Deutch. I got a wife and two kids. I'm leaving with the soldiers, and damned glad they're escorting us out of here."

Barnes spat. "You afraid of a few dirty Tontos?"

Deutch nodded. "I'm afraid of any Apaches. They ran the Spaniards and the Mexicans outa here, didn't they?"

Several men turned toward Hayes as he stopped at the edge of the gathering. "Do we still have to go, Sergeant Browning?" one of them asked.

"Yes."

Barnes sneered. "Why should we let them drive us out of here? The civil government says we can stay; the military says we can't. Let *them* figure it out. Meanwhile we can stay right here and to hell with the army's orders!"

Hayes raised a hand. "I've been patient," he said. "It seems to me Cort Barnes is damned anxious to stay here and get killed by Tontos. All right, let him stay! Let *any* of those who want to stay, do so. My men and I will be ready to leave in an hour. All those of you who want to go can gather at the fort before that hour is up."

Barnes flushed. He looked quickly at the serious faced men before him. "Are you men letting him bull you out of here?"

Deutch scratched his jaw. "Doesn't seem to me the sergeant is bulling anyone out of anything. Besides, Stephen Duncan has agreed to leave. Stephen is our leader; not you, Barnes. Seems to me you're taking a lot on yourself. Like the sergeant says: stay here if you like. As for me, I'm getting my things together to make sure I leave with the troopers." The short man turned on a heel. Most of the other men turned away also, leaving Hayes facing Barnes, Akers and old Sam Kermit.

Barnes glanced up at the fort. "Looks like Sergeant Browning has a big nose," he said to Dice Akers, "butting in here."

Hayes eyed Sam Kermit. "What the hell are you doing on a deal like this, Kermit?" he asked. "You're a desert rat. I can't see you digging in the creek bottoms and planting seed. What happened to that dream of striking a lode? Have you forgotten that after all these years?

Kermit looked up. "Me? Plant seed? Who the hell you kiddin', soldier?"

"You're in on the deal with Duncan, aren't you? You'll end up farming with the rest of these hombres."

Kermit cackled. "Not after I finish tracking down that vein, soldier. You won't see Samuel Kermit doing anything but riding around in a coach, wearing a plug hat and whirling a gold watch chain."

"Shut up!" said Cort Barnes. He gripped the old man by the shoulder.

Hayes dropped his hand to his Colt. "Keep talking, Sam," he said. "A light is beginning to shine through the clouds."

BARNES whirled, slapping his hand down for a draw. Hayes threw himself to one side. Akers whipped out his six-gun in a crossarm draw. "What the hell is this?" yelled Kermit. He turned to run just as Barnes fired. The slug slapped into his back and he pitched down the slope. Hayes drew and fired. Akers grunted and gripped his gut, swaying and then falling forward on his face. Barnes leaped behind

a tree and fired. Hayes hit the ground, rolled over and fired twice. Bark flew from the tree. Barnes cursed as the bits of bark temporarily blinded him. Men were shouting and running toward the fight. Barnes stepped out from behind the tree, holding a hand over his eyes. Hayes stood up and ran toward him. Suddenly the settler dropped his hand and thrust his Colt out toward Hayes. There was a wild look on his face. Hayes squezzed off. The slug slapped into Barnes. He dropped his gun and went down on his knees, scrabbling feebly for his Colt. Then he sagged to the ground and lay still.

Hayes ran to old Sam as the settlers came up. Kermit opened his eyes. "I'm going, soldier," he said quietly.

"What was Barnes trying to do?" asked Hayes.

Kermit closed his eyes and feebly waved a hand. "I came in here a year ago, poking around. These silver mines were supposed to be flooded. Either them Mexicans were lousy miners or else the Tontos had 'em really bluffed. Sure, the mines were flooded, but the lode cropped up on the far side of the valley under them low knolls you can see from here. Barnes agreed to grubstake me to trace it out. He and Akers tried to get a claim on this land but couldn't work it out. Duncan was roped in on the deal. Him and his dream of settling here. All Barnes wanted to do was let Duncan get the rights to the land and then beat him out of it some way. Barnes figured in time he could get his hands on the whole valley by riling up the Tontos enough to scare everyone else away." Hayes looked up at the serious faces of the settlers as the old man coughed violently. "Barnes never figured on the soldiers coming in to make everyone move outa here. That's why he was arguing against it."

Hayes eyed the valley, now filled with glorious sunlight. "My orders haven't been changed," he said, "you'll have to leave, Mr. Duncan. You still have rights to settle here before anyone else. The Tontos will be put on a reservation some day. You can come back then."

Duncan nodded. He looked up the slope at his wife and daughter. "I will tell them we must get ready to leave." He turned toward Hayes. "You have proven yourself a friend," he said quietly, "I wish that you could be one of us some day when we are able to return."

Hayes looked out over the valley. "My time is up in January. I've been looking for a place to settle down in."

Duncan gripped Hayes by the shoulder. "Let this be it. I can use you."

Later, as Hayes went up to where his men were lining up, he glanced back toward Duncan's house. A woman was standing there, holding up her hand in salute to him. Golden-haired Jeanne Duncan. Hayes turned toward his men. Joe Bentik stood to horse. His face was swollen so that he was hardly recognizable. Hayes looked at Corporal Donnelly.

"He fell up a wall," said the Irishman looking down at his big hands, "talking mutiny he was, Hayes. 'Twas up to me to beat hell out of him or turn him in at Fort Apache in irons. I figured we might make a soldier out of him yet, or kill him in the attempt. Are you ready to leave?"

"Yes. But I'll be back."

Donnelly nodded. "I figured you would be. If the Tontos let you."

Hayes waved a hand. "Their time is running short. The smart way to run this deal is to have the men come in alone, work the mines and teach the Tontos to mind their own business, and then bring in the women and children."

"Aye." Donnelly rubbed his jaw? "Do you think there might be room for one Irishman?"

"You called this place hell, at one time, Denny."

"Aye! But it could be made into heaven."

Hayes grinned. "We'll make it so, Shamrocks! We'll make it so!" ★ ★ ★

HELL'S WAY

By Bruce Cassiday

EIGHTY-FIVE years ago if you wanted to go to the Far West, you could choose one of four great trails: south by the Santa Fé Trail; central by the Overland Trail, the route of the mail and express; north by the Oregon Trail, the road of the settlers and homesteaders; and farther north by the Bozeman Trail, running into Montana from Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Toughest of these trails was the Bloody Bozeman—for it traversed the territory of the hostile Sioux Indians.

For protection against the Sioux, the United States government built three forts along the Bozeman Trail: Reno, Phil Kearney and C. F. Smith. They were each manned by two hundred or three hundred soldiers, an insufficient number to hold against the Indians.

In 1866 a trail driver named Nelson Story set out from Texas with three thousand cattle, headed for Northern Wyoming. His drive is typical of the many hazardous rides made over the blood-soaked trail. The Story party set out from Texas, twenty-seven men strong, freighters, cowpunchers, and Indian fighters.

Ten miles south of Fort Reno, the first stop along the Bozeman Trail, a group of Indians swooped down on the travelers, yelling and shooting arrows. Two of the party were wounded but nobody killed.

Story's trail herd pushed on into the hostile country, traveling continually on the lookout, always sending scouts on ahead. At Fort Phil Kearny soldiers came out and halted the train. General Carrington, commanding, ordered them to go no farther into Indian country. Story and his men spent two tiresome weeks hanging around the fort, wondering whether Carrington would ever allow them to move on.

The inactivity began to tell on the men, and Story called them aside. "The hell with this waiting," he said.

"What can we do?"

"I've got an idea," said Story. While he outlined the plan, his men began to smile.

Late that night Story and his twenty-seven men silently packed up, pushed the three thousand head of cattle quietly around the fort in a wide circle, and headed off into the wilderness, leaving Fort Phil Kearney far to the south. They were headed dead into the most hazardous part of the Indian country.

One member of the party later wrote: "The Indians were more afraid of the twenty-seven men in the wagon train than they were of the three hundred soldiers at the fort. The troops had old-style Springfield rifles, while the freighters and cowmen had Remington breech loaders. Twenty-seven men with Remingtons were enough to stand off three thousand Reds."

The man was right. The entire party reached Bozeman unmolested. The Bozeman Trail was closed in 1868, four years after it was opened, but while it was in use it was one of the bloodiest of all.

Indians swooped down on the travelers, yelling and shooting arrows

SIXGUN SINNER

By

Talmage Powell

His bride had made a bad mistake. Sheriff Kingsley wondered if saving his life should make her his again....

HIS office was in the fore part of the jailhouse building. He padlocked the door and stood a moment in the chill silence of the street. Pale moonlight etched the fatigue in his features.

He turned and walked slowly down the boardwalk, his bootheels echoing. He was

She tried to talk but the words stuck in her throat

a tall, rangy man with wide shoulders. He was so rawboned he looked awkward but he could move like a cat. He checked doors as he went along. Everything was secure. The town of Crowder's Folly was serene in the late night stillness, and his shadow lay long on the empty street.

He turned the corner and walked a hundred yards down the rutted side street to his house. It was a small, unpainted, frame house with a low-pitched roof, squalid and uninviting, typical of the town to which its existence contributed. Along the edge of the wide-planked porch was a row of lard pails containing limp plants. The plants hadn't been watered since she left.

He entered the parlor, closed the door behind him; and then he saw the yellow thread under a door across the room; his hand dropped to his gun.

The door opened. She stood like a picture in a frame, her soft, dark auburn hair suffused by the lamplight at her back.

The man said and did nothing for so long that her breathing began to sound loud in the small house.

"Ross," she said. "Ross, I'm back."

"I can see."

She stood with her hands limp at her sides, her head bowed. She was weeping silently.

Ross Kingsley said, "Why'd you come back, Ellen?"

"Because I love you, Ross."

His laugh was a bitter echo from grim days, empty nights. She flinched from it.

"I know how you must be feelin', Ross. But what I'm saying is the truest thing I've ever said. You're the only thing matters. I don't care how much I wanted to escape the mean little town and the loneliness, the hard life, the knowing you carry your life in your guns, the wondering if today somebody is going to put a bullet through the star on your chest. None of that seems too big for me anymore, Ross. I'm cured of my fretful ways. You're the only thing matters."

"Saying it twice don't make it so," Ross said. He added, "Some men would kill you."

"But not you, Ross." Her eyes pleaded mutely, her lips quietly. "Don't try to forgive me right now, Ross. It's too quick, I reckon. Just let me stay and clean the house and cook your meals for awhile. I'll work hard, Ross."

"I'll never forgive you, Ellen."

"If that's to be my punishment, then let it be," she said thickly. "But just let me stay."

"I wouldn't throw a homeless dog out," he said, and tried to find satisfaction in what the words did to her face; but there was satisfaction in nothing anymore.

He jerked open the door of the bedroom almost hard enough to tear it from its leather hinges. He pulled blankets from the bed. She watched humbly as he crossed the parlor to go out of the house. At the door he stopped. His face was a twisted mask. "He tired of you mighty quick, didn't he, Ellen?"

"No, Ross. He still wanted me. One thing you've got to believe. He was a decent man, an honorable man, or I never could have gone away in the first place. It was going to be a divorce for me and then marriage. But I saw that even that would be wrong—because nothing but you mattered."

"I hope you'll be bait enough to bring him back," Ross said. "I'll kill him when he comes!"

HE BEDDED down in the small barn near the house. But he didn't sleep. She was there in the house tonight, a reminder of how it had been when she was gone. Torture returned afresh; he tossed endlessly. I hate her, so help me, I hate her. I'll make her sorry she didn't go through with it; I'll work her until she's ready to drop. The Ellen I knew ceased to exist the day she slipped out of town on the same stage the drummer took.

At daybreak wood smoke was wavering skyward from the fieldstone chimney at the end of the little house. Ross washed up on the back porch and went into a kitchen that smelled of beefsteak, gravy, biscuits and coffee. The brittle air of a new day and the aromas were enough to empty a man to his toes.

She moved between table and sheet-iron stove. She was small, slender, delicately made. Her face was clear and fair of skin, her eyes deep blue. Her auburn hair was pulled to the back of her head and tied with a bit of ribbon, exposing her fragile ears.

Ross ate silently, ignoring her when she slipped into the chair across the table from him to eat also.

Without looking at her directly at any time, he walked out of the kitchen.

He saddled his horse in the barn. He rode past the house with his back straight, his gaze dead ahead. Instead of turning into Main toward his office, he rode out of town.

Twenty minutes later he topped a rise overlooking the McVane farm. It was a small place but as sternly neat and productive as any place in the valley.

A man and horse, hardly larger than toy figures from this distance, were plowing in the south field, tirelessly, mechanically.

The man and horse stopped finally when Ross rode across the field toward them. Old man McVane was the same color and texture of the oaken plow shafts between which he stood, reins looped about his neck. He wiped his face with a red bandanna and greeted Ross. "Howdy, Ross. Hear tell you got Dade Elswell in your jail."

"I brought him in last night," Ross said. "When I got home somebody was there waiting for me."

McVane's eyes narrowed over his hawk nose. His lean jaw tightened until his face was a stern mask. The mask a fanatic might wear. "Ellie?"

Ross nodded.

"Don't send her here, Ross. This ain't home to her no longer and I don't claim the daddyship of a wanton who'd run off like that. You send her here and I'll give her the horsewhipping she deserves and send her right back to you. Can't say I didn't warn you when you was coming moon-eyed out here to court her a year ago. Got the very devil in her. Wants fancy clothes, the city life. Lead you through hell, I warned you. Told you to keep a tight rein on her and a razor strop handy. You knowed in time. 'Twas no excuse, your letting her making you the laughing stock of the valley. You made the bargain with your eyes open; now you ain't agoing back on it, leastways not at my expense. Now I got plowing to do."

The old man slashed the bony horse with a length of rein. The horse lunged.

Ross watched and a light shifted in his eyes. I'd forgotten, he thought, what he was really like.

Back in town, Ross met Doc Edwards outside his office. Doc was a florid man of short stature who always breathed as if he'd just finished a fifty-yard sprint. Doc had attended the prisoner last night when Ross had first brought him in. Now Doc said, "Thought I'd look in on Elswell again. Found the office locked and went up to your—" He stopped.

Ross said flatly, "You went to my house. You saw that my wife had returned."

"Well, yes."

"Don't be afraid to say it, Doc."

"She looks a little peaked, Ross."

Ross' lips thinned. He said nothing.

"Sometimes, boy," Doc said quietly, "when you make the fire hot you get good steel."

"To hell with you, Doc."

Doc bit the end from a panatella. "Ross, I brought you into this world, slapped your bottom for you to get your first breath. I sort of hope to administer the same treatment to your children."

Ross whirled on him. Ross knew the hurt and torture and anger were naked in his face for an instant, because a light died in Doc's eyes and Doc stepped back.

"I'm going to jerk that red nose right off your face next time you stick it in my business," Ross said. "Now let's look in on the prisoner. You said last night he was in no immediate danger."

"He ain't. Just got to follow through our crazy human way of doing things, though, and take no chance he don't cheat the noose."

DADE ELSWELL was sleeping in his cell. He was nineteen years old with soft, fair hair and some of the boyhood pink still in his face. He was tall, gangling, and looked like a mischievous boy in sleep.

"Look at him, Doc," Ross said, "and try to remember what he did."

"Pretty hard," Doc admitted. "Did he really drag that stage guard to death?"

"Like a sack of meal behind his horse," Ross said. "Just for pure pleasure. To cow the passengers and driver completely. He told them if they didn't watch he'd shoot them in cold blood. He would have too, and they knew it. The stage guard had taken a shot at Dade, and it must have showed Dade something about himself, because he sure had to prove how tough he was."

"Dragging a helpless man to death over rocky ground," Doc said, "him screaming all the while." Doc shook his head. "He tell you where the gold was?"

"No, and we don't know who his sidekick in the robbery was yet, either. Both masked. But we'll find out. They might beat the individual lawman, Doc, but they never beat the system, the organization. One break is all we need, one slip, and we can wait for years if necessary. One loose word, like Dade dropped in the saloon in Lorimer. The sheriff there nabbed him. I went and brought him back here, winging him when he tried to make a break. Now it's a short future, and him only nineteen. Look at him, Doc—you just can't tell from the wrapping what a person is like inside."

Doc looked at Ross slowly. "No, and you can't judge a person on a single mistake, either."

"It depends on the mistake, Doc. It all depends on the kind of mistake."

At noon, Ross went to the house for dinner. It was on the table, hot and waiting. Ellen tried to smile when he entered but the smile died a quick death as she looked into his eyes.

She served him silently. He looked about the house and saw that she had cleaned it, every cranny and corner. It shone, it glistened, it smelled of lye soap.

He thought of what she'd said last night: "I swear, Ross, I didn't give myself in sin. It was to be an honorable marriage, after I'd got divorced."

Did she expect him to believe that? Trying to cloak what she'd done in an air of mewling respectability! He felt as if he was going to be sick.

He stood up at the table. "There's washing to be done."

"Yes, Ross."

He watched her carry water to fill the huge, blackened iron pot out at the edge of the yard, stumbling under the load as she hauled the heavy oaken bucket from the deep well, time after time.

He watched her build a fire beneath the big-bellied wash pot, cutting her own kindling at the chopping block beside the woodshed. Then he turned away and walked back to town. He didn't look awkward now. He moved like a great cat and his face was dangerous, hunting trouble.

HE ALMOST found it in the saloon. He pushed through the double doors and heard Willis York talking. Willis was a robust man, swarthy of countenance, balding. He was known throughout the valley for his great strength. He was a

blacksmith. Wearing the scarred and dirty leather apron of his trade, he stood at the bar with his after-dinner drink talking about the sheriff and his wife.

" . . . and nobody guessed until the day she went away," Willis was saying. "The drummer now, he was a sprightly individual with a way of looking you straight in the eye when he talked. Dressed as well as a Chicago cattle-buyer. Talked books and played chess with old Lud, the schoolmaster. Right smart, well educated man, Lud said. Straight man, Lud guessed."

"Then he runs off with another man's wife," a man next to Willis laughed.

"Yeah," Willis said, "you never know. Guess the drummer could talk in poetry. Musta made Ross look dull and commonplace."

A man in lifting his drink glanced toward the door. His arm froze. His drink fell from his hand.

Willis felt the sudden new feeling that came to the saloon. He glanced up. His face paled beneath its swarthiness.

Men began moving away from the bar, slowly, as if muscles failed the command to move readily.

Willis came erect with a sheen of sweat on his face. Ross walked across the saloon one slow step at a time and Willis was unable to take his gaze from Ross's hand resting on the worn bone handle of his gun.

Willis licked his lips and eloquently spread his hands before him. Ross recognized the message of the outspread hands: the smithy was unarmed.

Ross removed his star. It clinked in the stillness when he dropped it on the bar. He unbuckled his gunbelt, but before he laid it down, Willis burst out, "Dammit, Ross, we've been friends for years. I admire you more than any man in the valley. I'm not going to fight you."

"Backing down on your words?"

"I ain't backing down on a damn thing! You're sensible enough to know that Ellen coming back is going to cause some talk. Can't get around it. When it ain't news no longer, though, talk'll die out—if you let it."

Ross laid his gunbelt on the counter.

Willis backed away, shaking his head.

ROSS slapped him across the face, open-handed. Willis' head jarred with the impact of the blow. He lifted his hand, touched his cheek, and for an instant there was red fire deep in his eyes. He lifted his great hands to his eye level. His arms were bare from biceps down, where his blue shirt had had the sleeves cut away to give his arms freedom. Muscles bunched, bounced, coiled in his arms, quivering as if aching to release their power.

Then slowly the most magnificent pair of arms in the valley came to rest at Willis' side. A smile touched his lips, forced at first. "You're still the same Ross Kingsley I've hunted and fished with," Willis said. "I reckon I know why you did that. If it'll make you feel any better, try again." He shifted his head slightly so that his other cheek was exposed.

They looked each other eye to eye, unmoving. A man somewhere to one side let out a breath and said in a voice that was a near-giggle: "Sheriff, you had some trouble with that Dade Elswell, I hear."

Without taking his eyes from Willis, Ross said, "A little." Then: "Will, I'd be privileged to buy."

"I'm drinking rye," Willis said.

The encounter with Willis had shown him how it could be: People would stand with him. And with Ellen. If Ross showed he wanted it that way.

At two o'clock he was questioning the prisoner again. Dade Elswell remained cocky. For the third or fourth time he sneered in the sheriff's face and said, "You ain't got a thing on me."

"We got plenty, son. We got the bank notes you were spending in Lorimer—and we're going to find out where you hid the gold. We got the boasts you made in the

Lorimer saloon. We got witnesses off the stage who described everything about you except your face, your size, voice, clothes—that peculiar silver chasing on your gunbelt."

Dade remained unshaken, at least outwardly. Ross looked at the cruel, sadistic, boy-face before him and knew it was useless. Dade was one of those rank cowards who will do things a brave man refuses to do, because the cowardice was too great to admit. He was too much the coward to admit it. He would die rather than come honestly face to face with himself, because death held the lesser terror. Ross had seen that kind of man mount a gallows with a curse for the hangman.

Ross went out of the cell, locked it behind him. Dade slouched back on the hard bunk. "You don't expect this tin can to hold me, do you, Sheriff?"

Ross looked over his shoulder at Dade's face. What Dade really mean was that he would kill a certain sheriff if he ever got out.

THE arrival of the Denver stage that afternoon at four occasioned the usual flurry of interest around the way station. Folks gathered for the unloading of the mail sacks, exchanging banter with the driver and guard. Cramped passengers alighted to stretch their limbs. One of the passengers was a big, fleshy man with a round face and self-confident gray eyes. He was well dressed in a black suit, white shirt, string tie and beaver hat.

He talked to the driver, who pointed toward Ross. The big man walked over.

"Sheriff Kingsley?"

Ross nodded.

"I'm Austin Grigsby," the man said in a quiet, well-modulated voice, "representative of New Haven Casualty and Life Association. My card, sir."

He proffered the card with a slight bow.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Grigsby?" Ross asked.

"I just came up from Lorimer. You have, I believe, a prisoner in your jail named Dade Elswell?"

Ross nodded a second time.

"About a year ago," Grigsby said, "a wealthy lady client of ours in Denver was robbed of some jewels, which we had insured. I have worked unceasingly on the case and I'm convinced Elswell can enlighten us as to the fate of those jewels. It's highly important that we break this case, because as you may know, this type of insurance is a relatively new thing out here. The jewel robbery has made us look badly. Our home office in the east is sparing no pains to track down and make an example of the perpetrator of this deed.

"We can go into details of the case later, if you like. Briefly, Elswell was working for the old lady who lost the jewels. Everything pointed to him, but we were unable to find him. When I learned he was being held in Lorimer, I went there immediately, only to find that he'd been brought here because of a crime he committed in this jurisdiction."

"He's in now for something worse than stealing jewels," Ross said.

"So I understand," Austin Grigsby said with a faint smile. "Armed robbery and murder. Well, with nothing more to lose, perhaps he will help us recover the jewels. May I see him, Sheriff?"

ROSS studied the man before him, not caring much for a man who could smile at an armed robbery and murder charge. But he owed an insurance investigator a certain amount of cooperation.

"My office is down this way."

As they walked along, Grigsby lighted a thin cigar and chatted about the town, his gaze observant, taking in details of the street on which he remarked.

They turned into the office, Ross heeling the door closed. They passed through into the short corridor that led to the twin cells in the rear.

Dade Elswell sat up on his bunk, favoring his wounded left arm slightly. He got to his feet, looked past Ross at Grigsby, and laughed.

Ross heard gloating triumph in the laugh. Ross stiffened, threw a glance over his shoulder. Grigsby's face had grown cold. He was snapping a gun from a shoulder holster.

Ross dropped to one side. He pulled his gun but Grigsby had his weapon out and got off the first shot. It laid open Ross' cheek. He fell back. His head struck the iron bars of the cell. His eyes went out of focus and he couldn't move.

He heard Grigsby say, "You damn fool, I haven't even got horses staked out yet! I came now just to let you know I was here; so you could be ready."

A shot sounded, ripping away the cell lock. The door creaked. Dade's laugh exulted in freedom. "Never mind that. We'll get out of town. Plenty horses. The hay-shakers will scatter when we start shooting. First give me a gun and a minute to kill this sheriff."

"I came to spring you," Grigsby said harshly. "Your killing will have to wait."

Dade was laughing in his half-mad way. "Came to spring me—or to find out where I stashed the gold after we split up, Austin?"

Booted feet moved. A door slammed. Outside a man shouted; then a flurry of shooting started on the street. It was quickly over, followed by a silence.

Ross kept willing himself to get to his feet. At last willpower won. He stood swaying. His gun was gone, picked up doubtless by Dade.

A lot more was gone than just a gun. He could rearm himself in the office. The intangible thing he'd lost might never be regained.

Two or three men burst into the office as he reached it. He opened his desk drawer, pulled out a revolver, and stood holding it, a question in his eyes.

One of the men said, "They're in the hardware store across the street, Ross. They've got old Doc Edwards and Jacob Blane, the owner, in there. The two of 'em were playing checkers."

"And all that ammunition," a second man said. "Hurt bad, Sheriff? You're bleeding right smartly."

Ross wiped the blood from his cheek with a bandanna. He shook his head and brushed past the men.

On the boardwalk he stood a moment, glancing over the street. It was deserted, silent, as if life had vanished from it in the twinkling of an eye.

Willis York came down the boardwalk, walking close to the buildings.

He reached Ross' side. Ross said, "Dade's sidekick showed up with a business card and probably credentials picked up at a print shop someplace."

"I heard the shooting." Willis said, "and got away from the smithy in time to see part of it. They boiled out of the office at quarter-horse gait. Tried to grab a couple of horses at the hitchrail, shooting as they came. Didn't make it, though. Couple of the boys opened up."

MEN began to drift to Ross, as from nowhere. And then he saw Ellen standing alone near the corner of the building. The noise of shooting had brought her from the house. Her hair was in sweaty wisps about her face and dried soapsuds were still on her arms. She leaned against the building for support when she saw that Ross was alive and on his feet. She would have taken a step toward him; but his eyes stopped her.

Willis said, "Anybody got any ideas?"

They looked at the face of the hardware store across the street. Nobody seemed to know quite what to do. With Doc and Jacob over there every care must be used.

Ross's gaze roved over the buildings. "We can't approach from front or rear without them hurting Doc or Jake. But

there's that little vent window in Jake's loft. A ladder leads from the loft into the store."

"We could surprise them that way," Willis agreed, "if there was somebody we could get through that window. Take a slender boy to do it without making noise enough to warn them.

"Could get to Jake's roof easy enough from the feed store roof," a man said.

Glass tinkled across the street as Dade or Grigsby smashed a window. Dade yelled, "Sheriff?"

"You'd better come out," Ross said. "Save yourselves some trouble."

"Not half as much as it'd save you," Dade mocked. "It's you I want, Sheriff." Dade laughed. "Not these old geezers. I'm willing to trade. You drop your gun and come over and be sociable and we'll let the other two go."

The street was silent.

"How about it, Sheriff?" Dade hollered. "You're supposed to be a right brave man. You just drop that gun and walk this way and you'll save the lives of your friends."

Ross felt his breath tighten in his throat.

"Then," Dade said, "you'll just ride out of town with us. Insurance, sort of. Like Grigsby said he was selling." Dade laughed heartily at his idea of a joke.

Ross shifted. They were looking at him, the men around him, and he could feel the pressure of their eyes.

"Better make up your mind," Dade said. "We ain't got a damn thing to lose. We're going to shoot the doctor first."

ROSS willed himself to drop the gun and take a step forward. It might be foolish, but it was the only way he knew of saving Doc. It was a fair gamble that Dade would let Doc and Jake go. The sheriff would be hostage enough. Three men would be too much trouble to keep covered and under control.

All I've got to do, Ross thought, is drop the gun and cross the street. I'll even live until they're well out of town.

He found that he couldn't move.

I took an oath. It's my job. To die? I knew that was part of the risk.

The gun slipped from his fingers.

"Ross . . ." Willis said.

"We need Doc," Ross said. "Not another doctor closer than Lorimer."

"I'm getting impatient, Sheriff," Dade yelled. "I'll kill them both and drop you in your tracks!"

Willis again said, "Ross." The inflection this time was different. Ross looked at the faces about him. He knew he had friends, but they were not too important to him right now. The only important person was standing at the edge of the small group, her face as pale as death.

He wanted to look at her but he didn't. He was afraid she would see the weakness and suffering in his face.

He stepped into the street.

A small fury of hands, arms, auburn hair and pale face caught up with him.

She tried to talk but the words choked in her throat and she was only able to speak his name.

He caught her shoulders and held her away, and Willis put his arm around her gently, and Ross turned hurriedly to walk on across the street.

His breathing was shallow as he stepped up on the far boardwalk. Strength kept trying to fade from his knees.

The hardware store door opened.

"You'd better keep your promise, Dade!"

"Hell, yes, I'll keep it. I'd give my arm even for this. Step inside, Sheriff Kingsley."

Ross had heard of fear so acute it smelled. He wondered if the smell of him was on the street. He wanted to bolt and run blindly.

Instead, he held his shoulders straight and walked into the store. Dade looked a

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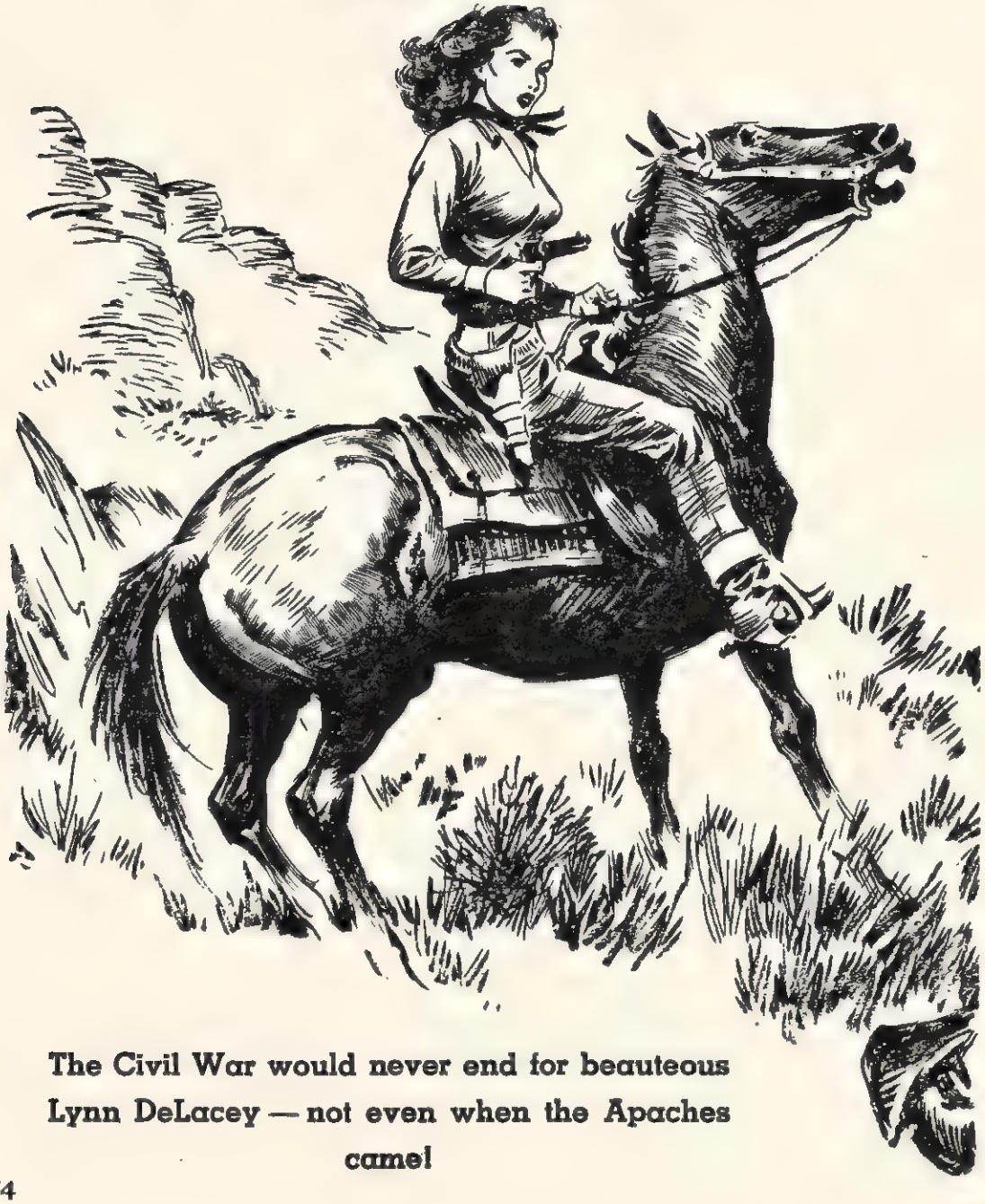
REBEL GIRLS NEVER DIE!

By

Steuart Emery



The Civil War would never end for beauteous Lynn DeLacey — not even when the Apaches came!

AS HIS sweating cavalry mount loped along, a strange sixth sense warned Alex Harlan of danger. It began with an odd tension of the muscles, an instinctive tightening of the stomach, and a swift coursing of blood that brought his rangy, desert-bitten frame into a state of abnormal alertness. The desolate panorama of cactus-spotted desert, stretching to the purple blur of the Border mountains, grew crystal clear, and the wall of the butte along which he was riding seemed to towef even higher. Behind that wall, on the vast acres of the Fort Quincy reservation, were a thousand penned-up Apaches, and only a month ago Tesla, the craftiest chief of them all, had brought his tribe across the desert, horseless and without rifles, and surrendered after years of murder and bloodshed.

It was said the hard winter and starvation had driven him in but Tesla had gone through a hard winter every year of his life. There was something mysterious

The heavy .45 came up, leveled at his forehead

somewhere and Lieutenant Alexander Harlan, veteran of five years of chasing and fighting Tesla, meant to get to the bottom of it. He had arrived at the fort at sundown the night before with B Company as exchange troop and had taken his first detail of twenty men out at dawn for a preliminary patrol.

Now he was returning along the eastern wall to the post and he had left his detail behind for a half hour's halt, riding on alone in the shade of the butte looking for spring water. The butte wall reminded him of a gigantic dam, holding back a human flood of red-brown killers. Out of any of the scores of clefts in the wall that gave onto the desert, explosion could come.

It came before he knew it, but from no Indian. The girl with raven-black hair and clear blue eyes was going to shoot him and he didn't have time to stop her. She had burst a tall roan out of a hidden cleft in the limestone, and reined down on a dime. He pulled his own mount back on its hind legs with all his strength to avoid collision and as its forefeet struck sand the girl's hand flashed to her belt and the heavy .45 came up, leveled at his forehead. At the instant of surprise her reaction had been instinctive. She couldn't have seen anything except that he was an officer in a blue uniform. Her smooth, sun-bronzed face was lovely—small aristocratic nose, firm chin, generous mouth, long-lashed eyes set well apart. Now those eyes held fierce resolve. The girl's features were implacable.

"Stop!" Harlan managed to shout. "Lieutenant Alexander Harlan of the reservation fort!"

His warning came too late. The bore of the .45 into which he stared gushed smoke, split by flame, but the girl's trigger finger jerked just in time. The jerk threw the Colt muzzle upward and the bullet that would have drilled him through the forehead drilled through the top of his campaign hat instead. Slowly the girl reached down and thrust the gun back into its holster, her look of resolve overswept by an expression of cold hatred.

"Sorry," she said. "You shouldn't come galloping out of the past like that. I happened to be thinking back to Tall Oaks coming down the trail and then you burst right on me out of Tall Oaks. So I shot, Sherman's bummer!"

The lash of her fury was terrible. Tall Oaks? Tall Oaks? When had Harlan ever been at a place named Tall Oaks, and what did Sherman's bummers, the riff-raff of bounty jumpers, degenerate soldiers and camp followers that soiled every army have to do with it? Raven hair in a glorious profusion, clear, blue eyes. That hair had been hanging down the back of a fourteen-year-old rebel spitfire tied with a ribbon, those blue eyes had been those of a child flaring with hate. And the gun in the little rebel's hand might have been the same one that hung now at her belt.

"Lynn DeLacey! Little Lynn DeLacey!"

THE years rolled back now and he and his patrol were fighting for their lives in the white-porticoed plantation home. Sherman was marching to the sea. Above their heads the house blazed into the night skies, then in a rush of saber steel and gunfire they were breaking out in a mad charge down the velvety old lawn through two full troops of Confederate cavalry. And from behind a huge oak Lynn DeLacey was stepping, blue eyes aflare, and firing straight into his face in the light of her ancestral home that he had put to the torch.

"Lynn! Miss Lynn! I remember! That was eight years ago."

"It was eight years ago for you, Lieutenant Alexander Harlan, Sherman's bummer! It was yesterday for me and the people like me whose lives you destroyed!"

"It was war, Miss Lynn. And war is—"

"Don't quote your damned General Sherman to me. War wasn't hell for General Sherman. It wasn't hell for you. It

was for people like us in an invaded country that war was hell. You burned our home, Sherman's firebug!"

"I burned your home, yes. I had to in order to save the lives of my men. I told you when I arrived with my patrol that it wasn't to destroy your house, well off our line of march. It was to see if it was being used as a headquarters for the big force of Confederate cavalry that was operating in our rear, tearing our supply lines to pieces. You flew into such a rage that—"

Never could he forget the picture of Lynn DeLacey, filled with hate and scorn, as she stood between the wide white columns with her bandannaed nurse beside her, flatly refusing him entry. A lonely child of war, her father and all male relatives away on the firing line, she defied thirty armed Yankees and their lieutenant, Alex Harlan, just one year out of West Point, but already steeled into a first-class fighting man by long months of combat.

Tall and lean he'd been at twenty-two, with a good rake to his jaw and a decisive mouth and chin; he'd picked up another half-inch somewhere and he'd filled out with hard muscle since then. He was sun-scorched to mahogany now. The sun had bleached his light brown hair, he didn't look thirty, he looked a hard-bitten, young forty. The years that had been unkind to his looks had wrought a marvel in this girl, now twenty-two. Lynn DeLacey had blossomed from an awkward little girl spitfire into a lovely, superbly-built woman spitfire. And he knew that her hate for him had grown with her body so that it had become part of her.

She swung gracefully to ground and loosened the saddle of her roan.

"You locked me in my bedroom with Mammy Chloe, Lieutenant Harlan, while you and your patrol searched the house, remember? So I went out the window and down the wall on the ivy and mounted and rode straight for the Confederate cavalry hidden in the woods ten miles away. Yes, they used Tall Oaks for a secret headquarters at night."

"I found that out," said Harlan. "There were plenty of signs in the downstairs rooms."

"And I brought two troops back to kill you. Call me a spy if you like."

"I'm calling you nothing, Miss Lynn. I could tell what had happened. Out of nowhere, just as night fell, we were trapped and attacked by a far superior force that knew all about the place. I couldn't hope to defend a house as big as Tall Oaks with my small patrol. So when your people swarmed up those old oaks at the rear and got onto the roof and were coming into the top floor windows, we were finished. I'd gotten the horses under cover so we mounted and rode. And you fired at me just as I passed you on the lawn and missed."

"I'm sorry I missed."

Harlan smiled grimly. "Charge it off to my luck. It's been good so far. So you happened to be thinking about Tall Oaks just now?"

"Happened? Do you think there isn't a day, hardly an hour when I'm not thinking back to Tall Oaks? There you stood in front of me again, only older, and I fired again and missed. And again I'm sorry I missed. If there ever should be a third time, Lieutenant Harlan—"

Lynn broke off, her eyes locked in his. This was no little rebel spitfire firing a gun for the first time, this girl had handled plenty of firearms. She knew how to shoot.

"Yes?"

"I won't miss."

DISMOUNTING also, Harlan wiped the sand grit from his eyes as a sudden swirl of dust traveled the wasteland. His head turned and he surveyed the arid, empty expanse of red-brown desert. The sun blazed down on it in an intolerable, furnace-like heat. It was a savage, violent

country down here on the rim of Mexico. It was a man-killing, scorching desolation that had dried him to the marrow and it certainly was no place for a gently-reared woman. A woman who had known only the beauty and the luxury of Tall Oaks with its velvety lawn and its ancient trees and vivid flowers, the carved mahogany, the damasks, the silver, and the oil paintings of its spacious rooms. All that he had taken from her with his torch. And yet, stripped by him of the gracious living of the Old South, she seemed to fit somehow in this new country—the West. The West belonged to fighters and she was a fighter.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked abruptly.

"School teaching is what I do. Is there anything else for a woman to do out here if she is well educated and without money to start a dressmaking shop or something like that in some brawling town? Would you like to see me in a low-cut dress and spangled skirts squawking ballads in a whiskey-wrecked voice in some honky-tonk for coins thrown from the floor, Sherman's bummer? I'm a school teacher for the Indian children on the reservation and I happen to have no school."

"No school?"

"Congress approved a new school for this reservation and then cut the Indian appropriation so that there isn't any, as I found out when I arrived here. So I'm trying to get the Apaches to build their own school. I've just come from one of their villages where I talked to them about it. In the meanwhile, since I'm paid nothing, I work as a clerk at the reservation railroad spur and keep house for James Swayne, the superintendent. He's given me the use of a small one-room bungalow behind his own cottage and I manage to keep going."

"Your—your near relatives?" asked Harlan. "Your father?"

"Dead in some God-forsaken frontier town in Texas. He came back to Tall Oaks when the war ended and Reconstruction began. That was when the whole occupying force of Union troops seemed to be made up of Sherman's bummers. Within a year my father shot and killed a Union officer and fled, with a $5,000 government bounty on his head. Six months later the letter came from a doctor in Texas with the news that my father had died of fever. He sent me his gold watch and his revolver, all that he had left. So I took the letter and the watch to the nearest Federal army office and the hunt was called off. I'd been living with an aunt thirty miles or so away after you burned Tall Oaks. I went back to her for a while and then moved west. Finally I reached here."

"I see," said Harlan. Into a few quiet sentences this girl had packed the tragedy and the loss of years.

"From Reconstruction in Georgia to Reconstruction in Arizona Territory," said Lynn bitterly. "Here you shoot and harry and drive the Indians whose land this is onto the reservation where they are numbers instead of living people."

"It's the Army's job to protect the settlers. Do you want the Apaches to rise?"

She stared at him hotly, but before she could speak he checked her with uplifted hand.

"Listen! Horses."

THE rapid thudding of hoofs was traveling down the cleft to Harlan's ears and there were plenty of them, coming at top speed. He stared up the gut to a bend a hundred yards away where the rock wall curved, hiding the trail beyond. No one would ride the cleft at such speed without a purpose and his instinct told him that that purpose was menacing. Then the riders burst forth from behind the cover of the wall and tore for him, a full dozen long-maned Apaches, bent low over their racing mounts. The tall Apache who led the rush caught sight of Harlan, clear to

view in his blue uniform, and let out a screech.

The yell rebounded off the rock wall and it was echoed by the other Apache mouths. In a welter of upraised throwing axes and lances the Indians stormed down on the white man and the white girl. This was a break-out in which the Apaches meant to kill anyone who stood in their way.

"Lynn, up! Ride for it!"

Harlan stepped forward, thrust both hands under Lynn's armpits and lifted. Fairly flung into her saddle, she gasped, sat erect and automatically gathered up her reins and felt for her empty stirrups. Harlan bunched his fist and struck hard into the rump of her startled horse. Snorting, the horse leaped straight out along the wall, going away. As Lynn's horse jumped, the Apache screeching rose into a crescendo and the first arrow whipped past Harlan's head. He vaulted for his own saddle, made it and whirled his horse to block the cleft's mouth, saber and revolver out.

"Halt!" he shouted in Spanish.

His command was drowned in the outburst of Apache screaming. Blood-mad they came at him, the tall Indian in front trying to ride him down. Just in time Harlan kneed his mount aside and the Apache's horse struck a glancing blow that sent him reeling in the saddle. He straightened in a swirl of driving lances and upraised axes, fending desperately with his saber and squeezing trigger. Smashed by the .45 slug, the nearest Apache went off his horse's back and Harlan fired into a grinning face a yard from him and saw it vanish in red ruin. Steel glinted as it stabbed in on him from the sides; it slashed his tunic but the Apaches were too close together for accuracy.

Under him his horse reared, screaming with the agony of a lance stab, and its iron-shod forefeet lashed into Apache flesh. Harlan slammed the barrel of his Colt onto a red-banded skull, swung saber in a backhand blow that took another Apache in the side, and drove for an opening that showed in the ring of his enemies. He lifted his .45 on the Apache who barred his way and fired. Only an empty *click* sounded from the shot-out gun. He dug spurs, yelling in futile rage, and a pair of arms closed about his waist as his horse jumped forward. He was in mid-air, prisoned in a viselike grip. Then he was down on his back on the sand in a fight for his life with the tall Apache, now dismounted, pinning his throat with one hand and poising an axe in the other.

In the last split second as the axe swished down Harlan caught the Apache's wrist and flung his body to the side. Over and over they rolled, grappling furiously. Harlan slammed his knee up into the Indian's stomach and heard his grunt of pain. The reek of rancid sweat clogged his nostrils; his foe was fighting him in a frenzy.

For an instant the Apache relaxed and Harlan surged upward, then the grip closed again and the Indian flung his full weight onto him, pressing him down. Once more the Apache's hand had closed on his throat, squeezing it relentlessly, and as his eyes dimmed and his breath choked Harlan felt the power draining from him. He couldn't hold the Apache's axe-hand any longer. He felt it rip free and heard the savage howl of triumph. Into his fading consciousness as the axe poised high tore a sudden brassy, keening note above a commotion of hoofs and shouts.

"Hang on, Lieutenant!" a man bawled.

THE Apache's head turned and in that second Harlan drew on every ounce of his waning strength and levered upward from the earth. His hand, scrabbling outward, touched something round and clutched it. It was the barrel of the revolver he had dropped. Through a mist that blurred his vision he struck and struck again and felt the heavy butt smash flesh and bone. Past him moccasined feet and horses' legs flickered. High-pitched Apache yells

answered the deep-throated shouts; the ragged crash of carbines fired from saddle erupted. Then he was lying exhausted on the sand and a blue column was reining down beside him.

"Fire, you raw-bottoms! Keep on firin'!" a man roared. First Sergeant Devery, bull-voiced and beefy of build, swung from saddle and as gently as though handling an injured child lifted Harlan to his feet. "Just made it, Lieutenant. Looks like you tried to take on the whole reservation. You hurt bad?"

"No!" Harlan gasped.

"That one is," said Devery and pointed to the tall Apache, twitching on the earth, is a red smear. "You hammered some common sense into his skull clean down to his ears. And so is that one and that one. Three good Apaches which tried to bust off the reservation and busted out into the Happy Huntin' Grounds instead."

"No wounded," Harlan commented, his mind clicking mechanically in Army routine. "So no information. They wouldn't have talked anyhow."

"Two wounded got away. They were rollin' in their saddles. Hit bad."

Harlan sent his glance along the miles of the butte wall. The first trickle had broken through that dam. He sensed that behind the wall the Apaches were boiling up into a flood that would sweep through the cracks in the dam until the whole barrier burst. His sixth sense had been right after all.

He brought up his field glasses and leveled them southward across the miles of wasteland where the thin plumes of dust streaked for the Border. It was useless to pursue. There was nothing to do but go on to the fort and report.

Lynn DeLacey was far up along the butte wall urging her horse back along its course at a rapid trot, carried a full mile from the fight by the run-away. In minutes she would be joining the column.

"Lash those dead Apaches onto horses and let the troopers ride double!" Harlan ordered. "I'll see what sign we can read off them when we get to the fort. Walk that horse of mine along; he's wounded. I'll borrow a mount."

Lynn pulled up as the last lashings went on. Dust lay thick on her smooth, tanned cheeks and her riding costume was awry, but her air was one of cool composure.

"Breakout from the agency, as I said, Miss Lynn." Harlan spoke quietly. "These three—" he pointed to the bodies—"failed."

"Break-out from the agency?" said Lynn. "Break-out from prison, you mean."

"Yes," said Harlan. "To them it must seem like that."

"And you stood in their way to freedom."

Harlan shrugged. "It happens to be my job. I told you that before. Have you noticed any signs of unrest in the villages you've visited?"

Lynn paused a moment before answering. Her lips were a firm line.

"No."

"I'm going to give Major Flood a warning to alert the fort," Harlan said.

IN THE troopers' column a horse tossed its head and whinnied and an answer came from beyond the cleft bend. Into view trotted a rider in hickory shirt and black trousers stuffed into heavy boots, a flat-topped Stetson crammed low on his forehead. He was an Indian, his mane close-cropped like a white man's. His flat-planed face was wedge-shaped and stony, his black eyes shifty. He gave the impression of solidity, mixed with a craftiness, the veneer of the white man's civilization imposed on a savage base.

"Loki," Lynn said. "Apache government scout and agency policeman. The best the reservation's got. He's been here a year. He's an outcast from Tesla's tribe, for molesting women or disobedience or

any other of the things an Apache is thrown out for."

Harlan nodded. The best scouts the United States Army had were the Apaches who for inter-tribal hatred or other reasons threw in their lot with the white men. And Loki, pulling up and saluting, looked more than capable. He was still young and vigorous. He'd hate Tesla and looked like he'd go for any woman who caught his fancy.

"You got Apache trying for breakaway?" Loki asked, taking in the scene with a single quick glance. His English was broken but understandable. His beady black eyes switched from the dead Apaches to Lynn. Hidden lights in them flared, then the hooded lids dropped.

"Good. I knowum these braves. Tesla's tribe. I police Tesla's jacals little time ago."

"Any idea who stirred them up? Did you mark any signs of trouble in Tesla's camp?"

"No savvy who makum breakout. Tesla getting too old make trouble now. Tesla makum trouble—" Loki's hand fell to the butt of the rifle scabbarded at his saddle—"I take care of old damn Tesla. *Si!*"

"Nine more got away, Loki," said Harlan and pointed to the south. Loki stared for a moment, then gathered his mount and began to move.

"I scout trail. Find out mebbeso where they go, then come back to fort." Again he tapped his rifle butt. "Mebbeso catchum one, two tonight when they camp. Bring back headbands."

He saluted and Harlan returned the gesture. Here was the perfect Apache stalker, off on a mission of scouting and killing, but this time on the side of the army. The strange flare was in Loki's eyes again as their hoods widened from slits. He no longer looked out on the desert. He was passing Lynn and staring at her. He kicked his mount in the ribs and it broke into an easy lope.

"All right, Sergeant Devery," Harlan ordered, his gaze in the distance. "Take the column along."

DEVERY barked his command and the troopers, in files of two, began passing Harlan and Lynn. The three Apaches' bodies hung over the backs of horses at the tail of the column. Harlan was looking at the dusty, sun-seared faces of his men as they passed, but his thoughts were far away. One more routine patrol had ended in action that would be forgotten tomorrow. Or would it? Was this minor breakout the prelude to a mass rising? Would two weeks from now see Apaches by the hundreds streaming out like a flood through the wall?

The fuse had been lit that led to the agency powder keg and by whose hand? The question hammered at him. Loki, who ought to know, had said that Tesla was too old to make trouble and that meant that some younger, more vibrant personality had been at work. Lynn, too, had been up in Tesla's camp before the break-out and she had said she had seen nothing. He wondered if she was telling the truth.

Motion caught his eye, the limp swinging of a dead Apache's arm. Harlan noted the heavy silver armband, superb work from some old Spanish treasure cache, that wound around the lower arm above the wrist with a single huge turquoise set in it. He brushed his sleeve across his dripping forehead.

"We'll trot on up to the column's head, Miss Lynn. All ready?"

"Yes," she said.

She, too, was drawing the sleeve of her riding shirt across her forehead. It had caught on a bush or cactus somewhere on her run-away, loosening the sleeve so that it fell away, baring her bronzed arm to the elbow. Above the wrist, worked into silver, shone the bluish-green turquoise, a perfect duplicate of the dead Apache's bracelet.

CHAPTER TWO

Storm Clouds

HARLAN lifted his head, lowered to avoid the dust that had been plaguing the column now nearing the log stockade of Fort Quincy in weary muteness. Men and horses were bone-tired, the heat had increased to ferocious intensity. Harlan and Lynn had exchanged no more than a few casual sentences all the way in to the fort. She had clearly wanted no conversation with the man who'd burned Tall Oaks. He scanned her face, lovely in profile despite the dust, taking in the firm set of the jaw, the steady resolve in the clear blue eyes. She wasn't a person who ever gave up to anyone; she would hate him for the rest of her life.

"I'm leaving you here," she said, veering her mount. The fort gate loomed ahead, the agency buildings and the railroad spur with its own heat-dried shacks across from it. In the big remount corral a mass of horses milled and stamped. In there at least two hundred half-wild horses, collected from ranches and *haciendas* south of the Border, waited their turn for shipment.

"I see James Swayne over yonder. He'll wonder how I come to be returning surrounded by troops." She motioned toward the station shack where a tall figure in overalls stood on the cinder bed, near a string of empty livestock and flat cars.

"I'll take you the rest of the way to him," he said shortly. "Sergeant Devery!"

"Yo!" answered the big sergeant, riding at the head of the column directly behind him.

"Take the detail in to stables and dismiss them. Lay out those Apaches in the shade of headquarters building. I'll be along in a minute."

"Yo!"

Harlan trotted after Lynn and caught up to her as she reached the station and the tall man in overalls. He might be in workman's grease-stained clothes, but there was an uncompromising strength in his stance and the gleam of the cold gray eyes set under beetling brows. His head was an iron gray thatch. A fierce haw-liked nose jutted. He was clean-shaven and somehow that seemed odd to Harlan. This railroad man had the stamp of command and breeding about him.

"This is Lieutenant Harlan, Mr. Swayne," Lynn said. "We had a brushup with Apaches and he brought me in."

"Thank you, sir," Swayne said. His voice held the same accent of the Old South that lay in Lynn's speech. He stretched out his hand.

"Lieutenant Harlan and I have met before, Mr. Swayne. He is the officer of Sherman's army who burned Tall Oaks."

Swayne's outstretched hand fell to the side of his stained overalls and it bunched so hard into a fist that the knuckles showed white. His gray eyes blazed. "I happen never to have been in Georgia, sir," he said. "But I know, of course, what Sherman's officers and men did there."

Yes, they were two of a kind, thought Harlan, Swayne and Lynn DeLacey. Both unreconstructed Southerners refusing to bury the old saber. Patrician Southern flotsam drifted West in hopes of finding a new country, carrying their old hatreds with them. Some dim memory rose as he scanned the proud, hawklike face of the man in overalls. Had he ever seen him before? Had that striking face made a subconscious impression on him somewhere in a crowd? But he hadn't been in a crowd in years. It was the face of a typical Southern aristocrat, duplicated hundreds of times in battle. Under a gray campaign hat he could have seen it or one like it somewhere in the fury of combat, only then wearing the traditional Confederate imperial like Beauregard, the way Union officers sported Burnsides.

"Can we forget that, Mr. Swayne?"

Harlan asked. "I've just been posted to this fort with my cavalry troop. We'll likely have to work together."

"If it is necessary we shall, sir," grated Swayne. "I am an old railroad man. Any railroad business which I am called on to do I do to the best of my ability. Here on this antiquated spur I am everything from superintendent on down. Right now I am going over a locomotive that needs repair." He straightened, his back a ramrod under the overalls. "That is sufficient conversation for the present, Lieutenant Harlan."

Harlan met the brusque dismissal with a stiff salute and turned his horse. "Do I see you again, Miss Lynn?"

"If it is unavoidable, Lieutenant Harlan. I do railroad work, too."

"I understand, Miss Lynn," said Harlan quietly.

He kneed his horse around and started for the fort, then altered his course to bring him onto the remount corral. Toward it, from the open shed where the weighing scales stood at the end of the cattle chute, a shortish, stringily-built Apache was moving, leading a cow by its halter. Tesla, the Apache chief, towing his beef supply off to his brush-walled *jacal* as though he were a squaw; Tesla in defeat, eating the white man's rations and living the life of a white man's prisoner.

Tesla had stopped close to the pole wall of the corral as Harlan pulled up. He was staring at the rambunctious mass of horses that milled inside without a trace of expression on his red-brown face, craggy and cruel and lined by the years. Not long ago, thought Harlan, he had ridden his own half-wild mustang, a chief and leader. Now he was horseless, his power gone, watching the drive and the speed of his enemies' horses, yearning no doubt with all his savage soul to be astride one of them and off and away over the limitless desert sands.

"Good afternoon, Tesla," said Harlan in Spanish.

IT WAS the first time he had ever spoken to Tesla; he had never even seen him in battle. He had been a red ghost out of sight in the background amid the rifle smoke of his yelling braves in half a dozen actions Harlan had fought in, where every time Tesla and his Apaches had gotten away. Tesla turned his gaze from the horses and his eyes met Harlan's stonily. He must be well into his sixties, Harlan figured. There was power in him, silent and menacing.

Tesla stared at Harlan and made no answer. "Break-out of some of your braves a while ago, Tesla," said Harlan. "Savvy anything about it?"

Tesla's lips drew back in a snarl.

"No savvy."

It was as though some desert wolf had growled in human speech. Tesla probably didn't have more than a dozen words of English, but he had plenty of Spanish, sign language and Apache and he wasn't going to talk in any of them. Also, he had a flawless alibi for himself. He had been miles away from the break-out, waiting to draw his government cow, when it had happened.

"There'll be an inquiry, Tesla," said Harlan, still in Spanish. "Think that over."

Tesla's gaze traveled Harlan from head to foot and he knew that in that single glance Tesla had taken in every detail of his appearance and marked him as dangerous. Tesla's eyes shifted to the corral and Harlan knew that that same, all-seeing gaze was marking down every trait and appearance of the horses.

What dark thoughts were in his wily Indian mind? Then Tesla turned and handed the cow's halter to the stout-bodied squaw who had come up with a scrawny pony. He didn't even bother to grunt at Harlan; he got astride the pony and started it for the long butte wall with a kick of his moccasins, the squaw patiently plodding after him with the cow.

Harlan watched him go, thinking hard. He touched spur to his own mount and loped for the fort gate. The sentry on guard challenged and the rifle salute with hand to breech was slovenly. Harlan went on past him onto the baked parade ground with the flagstaff at its center, the colors drooping in the afternoon heat. Everything about the post, from the splintery-sided frame and adobe buildings to the stray troops going about their fatigue duties, seemed stricken by the heat. The men moved inertly, there was no snap to the non-coms' commands, a lack of discipline and pride in military performance showed in every action.

Rotten commander, rotten regiment, thought Harlan, dismounting at Headquarters porch. He'd had hardly more than five minutes with Major Flood, the post commander, on arrival with his troop the night before. He'd reported and Flood had turned him over to his adjutant, to whom he had suggested his first-day patrol. Now he was going to find out what kind of a post commander he was serving under, what kind of a man held his life and the lives of his troopers in his hands.

A MIDDLE-AGED sergeant-major with a head like a billiard ball stared dully at him as he strode into the outer office and Harlan felt mounting depression. Plenty of sergeant-majors got to have heads as hairless as billiard balls in long years of service, but they didn't have any right to grow dull inside them. The door to the inner office opened and a quartermaster captain ambled out, the top of his tunic open. Harlan clicked his heels and snapped his salute.

"Hello, Lieutenant," said the quartermaster captain genially, not bothering to raise his hand. As he passed Harlan noticed the blue-black stubble pushing through to the surface of his chin and cheeks. So Major Flood's captains didn't even bother to shave in the mornings. Through the open door Flood's voice called, "Come in," and he entered the inner office.

Where Flood's quartermaster captain had slackly left the top of his tunic open, Major Flood had his tunic unbuttoned all the way down, showing the blue shirt under it dark with sweat. He was an overfleshed, over-aged officer with a close-cropped, white-brown beard covering a wide jaw. He had an air of solidity clinging to him, but it was a past solidity. There was no drive, no aggressiveness in his fever-yellowed face, and as he moved his body in his chair it seemed stiff from old wounds. Harlan knew his record in the rough, one of undistinguished competence as a cavalry major with Sheridan, courageous but without imagination. Now he would be finishing the last few years of his army service at this reservation fort, garrisoned by three companies of infantry and a cavalry troop with his majority as a positively final rank.

Harlan went stiff, his salute well-drilled. "Lieutenant Harlan reporting back from patrol, sir."

"Back, eh, Harlan? Sit down and have a cigar."

The wave of the hand toward the cigar box and the words were both the height of cheerfulness. There was no formality, no discipline in them and when there was fighting business afoot on the frontier discipline was paramount, the friendly amenities came last. A post headquarters wasn't conducted on the lines of an officers' club after Retreat. Age had caught up to Flood, the long years of meritorious and uninspired service had dulled him as much as it had dulled his sergeant-major outside, and in doing so it had dulled the entire fort.

Harlan sat down. "A dozen of Tesla's braves tried for a break-out, sir. Three were killed, two wounded. No casualties for my patrol."

"Glad to hear it. Give me the details, Harlan."

Harlan spoke wihle Major Flood alter-

nately puffed cigar smoke toward the ceiling and slapped at droning green Arizona flies. He made his report as brief as possible, mentioning Lynn's presence but saying nothing of their long-ago meeting. When he finished Major Flood continued to inspect the ceiling through a cloud of cigar smoke.

"I figure that it's the crack in the reservation wall, Major. The first sign of a general uprising."

"I don't," said Flood pleasantly. He chased a couple of buzzing flies ceilingward with a puff of smoke. "I figure it as just a hothead outbreak of a handful of braves with too much energy who got tired of being cooped up and got hold of horses. Spur of the moment stuff, suddenly jumped the camp."

"This was no spur of the moment stuff, sir," said Harlan soberly. "This was a planned break-out. They came hell-for-leather down that cleft, ready to kill anyone in their way."

"No, you just ran into an incident, Harlan, and you conducted yourself very well. I'll make a note of that when I write my weekly report for Department Headquarters."

Slip the break-out into a weekly report several days from now when Harlan could hear the telegraph clattering in the nearby signal shack?

"Sir?"

"When Loki gets back from his trailing of those braves I'll send him around the reservation with a warning to Tesla and his sub-chiefs. In every prison camp, Harlan, you can expect sporadic escape attempts. After I was wounded at Winchester I was sent back as warden of a rebel prison camp in Indiana. I treated the prisoners well—got them pretty good food, and plenty of writing material and so forth, and I used to send the older men and young boys out to do light farm work with a guard. Here and there a few men tried to escape but they were caught. All prisoners are the same. These Apaches are well off and they know I'm their friend."

HARLAN stared carefully at Major Flood. Now he had his finger on the rot in Fort Quincy. Major Flood was a good, unimaginative soldier, he was a humane officer. Without any Indian combat experience he was classifying his wards as prisoners who would be docile if well treated. But these weren't middle-aged men and young boys in the last year of a four-year war, who knew in their hearts already their cause had lost and would wait patiently for release and return to their homes and freedom.

Major Flood had turned the reservation into a well-run prison camp where everybody took it slowly; he made life as easy as possible for everybody in it from Apaches to officers and men of the garrison. The only competent, ready-for-emergency outfit in the fort would be Harlan's own cavalry troop, and it was beginning to look as though he were the only emergency-ready officer in it.

"Want to look at the dead Apaches, Major, and study them for sign? They're out back of this building by now."

Major Flood looked reluctantly out of the window onto the heat-seared parade ground. It was excruciatingly hot here inside walls, it would be even worse in the open air.

"I imagine I should. I don't see how they can show anything that Loki won't bring in. Loki's a fine policeman-scout. He's been my eyes and ears around the reservation Indians for a long time now." Flood heaved his bulk from his chair, puffing a little. "All right, Harlan."

They rounded the corner of the building to its rear and found Sergeant Devery there, sitting on a barrel with the three dead Apaches laid in a row in the scant shade of the wall and a dozen infantrymen chewing tobacco and commenting as spectators. Dead Apaches killed in combat apparently

to this garrison were a novelty. To Harlan they were nothing new, they were lifeless, they couldn't talk, but often a dead Apache's garb or his tribal ornaments or his weapons would give away information that an experienced officer could use.

"Nothing here but bloodstains," said Major Flood. "You hit hard, Harlan. Get them underground and forget it."

"I can't forget it, sir," said Harlan in desperation. "There's something wrong about this entire situation. Tesla walked in and surrendered without a fight, bringing a core of at least two hundred able-bodied braves with him. Now the first spearhead has broken out and I've just seen Tesla. He's as crafty and unconquered as ever."

"He's old and tired and knows he's licked," said Flood. "He quit when the quitting was good. He has barely a handful of horses and no rifles, only the bows and arrows we allow him. I said forget it, Lieutenant." Major Flood's voice dropped its easy-going tone and took on the accent of authority. "And I mean forget it. I'm in command here."

Flood raised his neckerchief and tiredly mopped his streaming forehead. The heat was hitting him hard, thought Harlan, and because he was tired and old at sixty he figured everybody else of that age would be the same. But an Apache like Tesla was ageless. At sixty he had the spirit and endurance of a white man of forty. In Major Flood Harlan had hit the immovable object, bedded deep in sheer inertia, and he wasn't any irresistible force. Now he had angered Flood and nothing he said from now on would be listened to.

"Yes, sir," he said numbly.

Flood started to walk heavily away. "This is no climate for bodies. Tell your sergeant to muster the burial detail at once."

Flood rounded the corner of the building and Harlan stood staring down at the three dead Apaches. In the blazing sunlight the forehead of the tall Apache he had killed seemed to be carrying a dull coloration he hadn't noticed before. Moved by sudden impulse he bent over and ripped the Indian's long-tailed reservation shirt from top to bottom, baring his powerful chest. There it was, the sign he had subconsciously been looking for, the heavy streaks of yellow and vermilion warpaint hidden under the cloth. He was aware that Sergeant Devery stood beside him, his competent face inscrutable.

"War paint, Devery," he said quietly. "A good many hours old by its cracks. These Apaches were war dancing last night and washed the paint off their faces for their break-out but let it stay on under their shirts. Apaches don't like to wash. That's how I read it."

"Same here, Lieutenant," growled Devery. "War dancin' makes powerful medicine. It means business right away. When d'you figger the general bust-up will come? I'd figger it for not later'n tomorrow."

"I figure it for tonight, Sergeant. And there's no use taking this latest evidence to Major Flood. I've fouled myself up completely with him; he'd call the war paint some more innocent hothead hijinks."

Swift determination gripped him. "I'm going to take a patrol from B Company into Tesla's camp tonight, Devery, permission or no permission."

"Yes, sir," said Devery, and winked in a most unmilitary manner.

CHAPTER THREE

The Iron Trail

ACROSS the moon-washed parade ground drifted the haunting notes of *Taps* sounded by headquarters bugler from his stance beside the post flagstaff. The strains of a harmonica played in B Company's barracks died away, the low hum of troopers' voices at end of day faded with

it, the lights winked out, and only in headquarters and in the guardhouse by the gate the lamplight glowed in square patches.

In the stables horses stamped and became quiet; from beyond the stockade the high-pitched whinnying carried still, where the restive remounts were corralled. Standing in the open window of his bakingly-hot adobe quarters in the long, one-story Bachelors' Hall of the single officers Harlan looked out over the post with the same old problem hammering at his mind. There was another problem, having to do with a girl, but he had managed to keep that in the back of his mind.

Major Flood had warmed into more genial friendliness after mess with a few whiskies under his expanded belt. He was in headquarters now and in his present mood he might allow Harlan to take his patrol into Tesla's camp before dawn. If he refused permission and Harlan took the patrol anyhow, as he fully meant to, he could break Harlan clean out of the service for insubordination in case Tesla was making no trouble. In the Army you could go just so far and no further against rank.

He picked the towel off the table by the window, sloshed it into the water bucket and ran it over his half-stripped body. Idly he had been conscious that the telegraph was chattering in the signals shack next to headquarters but its noise too died out with the last note of *Taps*.

As it fell silent he had the sensation that a link with the world outside the post had been snapped. What was going on out there in the night beyond the stockade. What was going on in Tesla's mind, some savage plan that would launch flame and death along the Border? There was no way of knowing from inside the fort.

The sharp challenge of the gate sentry sent his glance swerving in that direction, but even as it swerved he glimpsed the figure that came out of headquarters and ran at top speed in his direction. The gate

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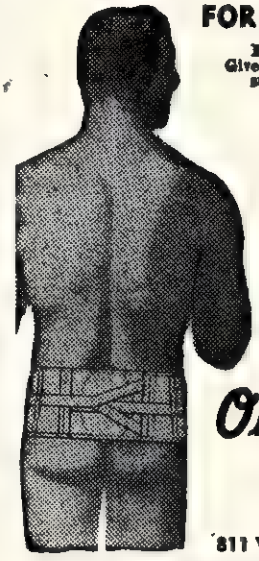

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swung open and through it cantered a man on horseback. In the clear moon brilliance Harlan could make out that it was Loki, cruelly spurring a tired mount with an Indian's disregard for the animal he rode. Then the running man was drawing up on the porch and saluting Harlan, standing in the door.

"Major Flood's compliments and will Lieutenant Harlan report to headquarters immediately, prepared for emergency duty."

"Right!" Harlan snapped, his pulses leaping. "Get over to B Company's barracks, orderly, and rout out First Sergeant Devery. Tell him to report to me at headquarters."

The orderly darted off and Harlan crammed himself into his uniform. His fingers seemed all thumbs, his shirt caught as he pulled it over his head, he fumbled at the buttons of his tunic. Then he was striding across the parade ground, fastening his gunbelt in transit. That telegraph, he sensed, had carried a message from Department. Major Flood must have changed his mind and wired them of the Apache break-out and Department had come back with a fast order. Now he and B Company were going to ride on Department orders.

HE PASSED Loki's draggled horse, tied to the hitchrack, went by the dull-eyed sergeant-major in the outer office and walked straight in on Major Flood, comfortably squared away behind his desk with Loki standing before him, rifle cradled in his arm.

"Here, sir," said Harlan.

"You came fast, Lieutenant," said Flood approvingly.

"Emergency, I believe, sir?"

"That'll wait a minute until I finish with Loki here. He's reported those braves who broke out scattered like a lot of quail when they reached the Border. The seven of them that were left broke up and went off into the canyons singly. So there's your false alarm, they were escapees each man out for himself and any possibility of a general break-out is washed up."

"Seven of them? There were nine."

Loki moved his big body and for the first time Harlan saw the long-maned scalps lying on Flood's desk with their ghastly crimson shells of skin exposed. A green and a yellow headband lay beside them.

"I shootum two, stay behind at spring when others leave," said Loki. "Bringum scalps, bringum headbands back to show."

"Are we buying scalps in this post?" asked Harlan incredulously.

"That's enough, Harlan," said Flood. "I certainly don't approve of taking scalps but what's done is done. When the word of this gets around the reservation it will certainly discourage any breaks.

"If I could take B Company out right now or before dawn and make a show of force at Tesla's camp instead of waiting—"

"That's enough, Lieutenant Harlan," said Flood stiffly. "Neither Loki nor I agree with you."

"No trouble from old damn Tesla," said Loki. Harlan stared into his hooded eyes. They were like blank, empty windows. "I show old Tesla scalps tomorrow. Old damn Tesla crawl into hole."

"Then there's no emergency duty, sir?"

"This is your emergency duty, Harlan." Flood lifted the yellow telegraph message from the desk "It's from Department Headquarters and it's the old Army game. For over two months we've been collecting and buying remounts for the Border forts on Department's orders and for two weeks now the fort corral out yonder has been filled. So what? I wired Department we were ready to ship and Department wrote back I'd get my orders in due time. Now this telegram comes in ordering instant shipment to the Department supply center by rail—rush, rush, rush. That means load those horses tonight and get them on their way."

"Yes, sir," said Harlan.

"The corral guards know horses, but they're hardly more than a dozen men. I'm handing B Company the job of putting those horses aboard the livestock cars right now and the corral guard will travel with them to Department. Turn out B Company, Lieutenant Harlan, and supervise the job. That's your emergency; it'll take you the rest of the night. It'll also take your mind off Tesla."

"Yes, sir."

Harlan said nothing. He felt drained, rendered powerless.

"See Swayne about the cars. He'll make up the train and despatch it. He's got his own strange ways and he's a standoffish cuss, but he's the best railroad man I've ever seen."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all, Harlan. Get going."

HARLAN turned for the door, passing Loki. Loki's eyes were no longer blank and empty: in their depths the hidden lights seemed to be flaring again. In the mind of Loki, once free Apache and now policeman-scout for the white man, Harlan had suffered humiliation and defeat. Major Flood had thrown aside all Harlan's warnings, all his foresight and taken Loki's word. Superb scout though he might be, Loki could be wrong; Major Flood could be wrong. And also Harlan could be wrong. His overheated brain seemed to be a boiling stew of frustration.

On the porch Sergeant Devery sat stolidly on a bench and Harlan motioned to him. Devery hauled himself to his feet and clumped after Harlan onto the sand where Harlan drew a cigar from his pocket. He fumbled for matches.

"Light, Lieutenant?"

"Thanks." Harlan bent his cigar to the held-out match flame and drew in the first soothing smoke. "B Company loads the remounts onto cars for Department the

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rest of the night, Sergeant. That's our emergency. And after that, by heaven, I'm going to take a strong patrol bang into Tesla's camp, and see what's what, tired as the men may be."

"They'll get over bein' tired, Lieutenant," said Devery. "They know about the war paint. They don't like it and they'll prefer keepin' their hair to havin' a nice rest after loadin' detail."

"Major Flood said no to me again, Sergeant. But we'll do it just the same—and the hell with him!"

"Pass it off as horse exercise before breakfast, sir," suggested Devery. There was little rank in such a moment as this. Harlan and his first sergeant had been through too much action and hardship together for any pretensions in off moments. "Or we can lose some remounts loadin' and have to go lookin' for 'em, thereby takin' us old Tesla's way, which they went."

"One way or another we'll do it."

Harlan turned suddenly as the snort of a horse rose behind him. Loki had come out of headquarters and stripped the saddle and bridle from his tied-up mount at the hitch-rail. He hit it hard on its rump with the butt of his rifle and it whinnied in pain and galloped wildly in the direction of the stables.

"What are you doing, Loki? Aren't you going to water and feed and rub down your horse after a hard ride?"

Loki's mouth widened in a grin. "Let damn horse go water himself. Pushum in with other horses for feed." He piled his saddle gear on the porch. "Orderly findum and pickum up in morning. Bringum to Loki. You got cigar for Loki?"

"No," said Harlan shortly. His jaw hardened. Loki's tone had a jeer in it. It was clear that Harlan had come down several notches in his estimation and that Loki had gone up in his own eyes. "Let's go, Sergeant. You turn out B Company while I go make the rail arrangements with Swayne."

HE STRODE for the gate as Devery broke away from him in the direction of B Company's unlighted barracks where tired, snoring men would wake with curses. But they'd be at the corral at the double; B Company did everything fast and it did whatever job was handed to it well, usually amid a cloud of sulphurous profanity. Beyond the gate as Harlan passed through it the railroad buildings were dark except for the glow of lamplight streaming from the windows of Swayne's cottage. He picked his way over tracks and between loose cars, coming onto the building from the side. He started to round the corner, making for the front porch and stopped.

"Destruction to all blue-bellied Yankees!"

The voice was sonorous, traveling from inside the cottage. Harlan stepped forward and stared through the open window where the curtains hung listlessly in the hot night. He was looking into Jame Swayne's living room at a James Swayne transformed. Here was no overalled railroad superintendent, but the Southern aristocrat he had been before the war. An old but beautifully-cut frock coat clothed his powerful frame, snowy linen showed at shirt bosom and cuffs, his black string tie was perfectly tied. He sat at a homemade table opposite Lynn deLacey, slender in a low-cut cotton print dress, and he was lifting his glass to her in a toast. Beside him stood a cut glass decanter with a magnificent silver guard worked into the upper glass, an heirloom of obvious antiquity.

"And destruction to Lieutenant Alexander Harlan in particular!"

It was strange, thought Harlan, how the old hatred still lived. This was a Western room he looked into with clean pine walls and furniture expertly made of rawhide and wood. On the walls were water colors of the desert, done by an amateur but well done with color and skill, probably Lynn's work out here. Indian blankets gave splashes of color on the walls and draped over the table on which dinner had been

served. It was a room of the new West in which the spirit of the ruined but unconquered South still dwelt, the drawing room of a broken Southern aristocrat and a young Southern girl to whom he offered the hospitality of his roof.

"Destruction to Alexander Harlan," said Lynn clearly, and raised her glass. It was filled with a golden liquid from the decanter, some Spanish wine from below the Border, Harlan figured.

Lynn lifted her head at a sound, looking at the door behind her.

"Who's there?"

"Me."

Loki came through from the kitchen, rifle slung on his shoulder.

"How, nantan!" he grunted to Swayne.

"Good evening, Loki," said Swayne courteously.

Loki tossed a pair of beautifully worked silver bracelets on the table. The green of an emerald glowed in one of them. "Loki catchum off Apaches. Nantan Swayne wantum buy?"

Loki's eyes, widely-flaring, fastened on Lynn. With a finger tip he pushed the emerald bracelet toward her. "For you. From Loki."

Lynn shook her head. "I'll look at them tomorrow, Loki. By daylight."

Loki hunched his shoulders in a shrug. "Fort soldier chief makum job for you," he said to Swayne. "Want all cayuses loadum on iron horse. Take cayuses away pronto. You work all night."

"Yes?" said Swayne.

"Horse Lieutenant tell you soon. You got drink for Loki?"

"In the kitchen, Loki. Help yourself."

Loki licked his lips thirstily. His hooded gaze swept past the window into which Harlan was peering and just in time the vagrant breeze closed the curtains. His glance traveled on and flicked over Lynn.

"I go," he grunted, and stalked out the door behind the girl.

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Harlan moved fast around the building to the front porch. He had no intention of waiting for Loki to come out the back door and spot him if the Apache turned his way. The door of the bungalow was wide open to admit the breeze and he stepped onto the porch and knocked on the wall beside it.

"Swayne!" he called. "It's Lieutenant Harlan. Emergency railroad job."

"Come in."

HARLAN stepped inside and faced Swayne, who had risen to his feet. Out in the kitchen he heard the back door close softly behind Loki, making his get-away. Swayne stared at him frowning, saying nothing, waiting for him to speak. He wasn't going to waste words on a man he hated and neither was Lynn.

"Department telegram just in ordering us to load the remounts and rush them by rail to department headquarters, Mr. Swayne. My troop will load the horses. It's up to you to make up the train and get it moving as fast as possible. It'll be an all-night job I reckon. I'm sorry to spoil your night's sleep."

"Sleep is nothing to a railroad man, sir," said Swayne coldly. "It is merely a matter of stirring up my engineer and fireman. As soon as steam is up on the switch engine it will start moving the livestock cars up to the corral gate, where the single-track runs, and you load there with the corral chutes. When the horses are all aboard the switch engine will push the train out to the main line where the freight locomotive will be hitched on for the run to Department. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely."

"Then please be sure our watches synchronize."

As Swayne reached for the gold chain across his vest Harlan drew out his silver turnip and laid it face up on the table. Swayne snapped open a magnificent gold hunter watch and put it beside Harlan's. On its case Harlan could see the delicately-chased coat-of-arms. "You are two minutes off, sir. It takes a good watch to maintain correct time on this desert."

"Yours is a splendid piece," said Harlan admiringly. He stopped short, staring at the silver-mounted decanter. On its plate the same coat-of-arms showed and the initials "B" and "L" with a small rubbed-out lettering between them.

"A railroad man's watch must be like Caesar's wife," said Swayne stiffly. "Above reproach."

"And this heirloom is marvelous also," said Harlan, his hand reaching out instinctively to pick up the decanter.

"You will kindly not touch that, sir!" Swayne spoke with a quick angry rasp. "It is excellent Spanish sherry but I have no intention of offering it to you. I do not drink with the officers in this fort or invite them to accept my hospitality. In this house you are a fort officer giving me my railroad task to perform which as a railroad man I shall carry out." The years-old fury rang out. "You are not my guest, no Yankee destroyer will ever be my guest!"

HARLAN'S hand dropped away and he felt his cheeks redden under the insult. In front of Loki, Major Flood had humiliated him, in front of Lynn, James Swayne now humiliated him. Who did James Swayne, superintendent of a dusty desert railroad spur, think he was with his overbearing arrogance? Into his mind the vague memory that he had been trying to raise crept into clearness.

He was back in the drawing room of Tall Oaks, with bullets slashing through its windows, directing the fire of his trapped patrol. Confederate bullets were pouring through the draperies and thudding into the wall behind him where the old oil paintings hung. Paintings of men in antiquated fashions, lace ruffles and powdered perukes and blue swallowtails. And the faces of them, generation by generation, were the same—the DeLacey face handed down from fa-

ther to son. Hawk-like, proud, strong with authority and position.

"Very well," said Harlan and moved for the door. His own rage, long held back was rising. Swayne stepped with long strides after him. Lynn looked at him, expressionless, and said nothing. Harlan passed onto the porch and reached the sand, turning. Swayne stood with the door framing him as though it were the frame of a painting. "Get that train going," he said.

"I shall," rasped Swayne. "In the future, Lieutenant Harlan, when you have an order to give me, kindly send for me. Do not come to my house unannounced and invade it again."

"I won't." Harlan's pent-up rage broke in a flood. "I won't invade your house again. Twice is enough."

He went into a long stride and the words, coming out by themselves, cracked back over his shoulder.

"Colonel Buford DeLacey!"

"Haul that loadin' chute! Pull away, you weakbacks!"

The roar burst from First Sergeant Devery over the whinnying and snorting of the load of horses going aboard the cars. Yanking at the gangplank ropes, the troopers ripped it from the open side of the car and it fell thudding to the sand with the last remount aboard. The bars fell across the car door and, puffing black smoke, the squat switch engine began to push still another horse car for the main line. Harlan stood beside the corral gate watching the outfit he had welded and forged into a fighting outfit go at this fatigue detail hard and fast and efficiently. The corral boiled with dust that crept into his lungs, the night heat was overpowering, exhaustion was seeping into his own veins, but the job was being done.

"Lift that loadin' chute! Shove it in!"

The troopers lifted the railed gangplank and drove the horses up it into another car. One, two more cars and the loading would

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be finished, the horse train would steam for the east. In the station shack light gleamed where Colonel Buford DeLacey directed the make-up of the train whose locomotive already waited with steam up. Colonel Buford DeLacey, Lynn's father, who was wanted on the charge of murdering a Union officer in Georgia, and who toasted destruction to all blue-bellied Yankees and to Alexander Harlan in particular, the Sherman's bummer who had burned Tall Oaks. Hatred from DeLacey, betrayed by his own old heirlooms out of the past, hatred from Lynn, from captive Tesla, opposition from the inert Major Flood and mocking disdain from Loki. It was a night in which conflict and fury crowded in on him as oppressively as the heat, all leading to some kind of inevitable explosion. He'd be glad when the last of the loading job ended and he could go into action, riding for Tesla's camp. And after that what was he going to do about Colonel Buford DeLacey who, playing dead, again would be wanted for killing a fellow officer?

The scream of the locomotive whistle ripped through the chaos of his thoughts and he was conscious that he had heard the crash of cars being coupled up. By the station shed he saw DeLacey waving a lantern and caught his voice raised in peremptory command. The horse train was made up; DeLacey, the old railroader, was despatching it. Driving wheels ground, sparks flew from the bell stack, metal complained as the dead weight of the cars was taken up and the train drew into motion. The rail spur beside the corral gate was bare.

"First Sergeant Devery!" The big sergeant came up at a fast trot. "Take the men back to barracks and rest them up for an hour. Then pick out a detail of the twenty best men in B to saddle up and ride for Tesla's camp. Just before dawn would be the best time to get there, I figure."

"Yes, sir."

One problem was started on its way to its end, thought Harlan, as the troopers shuffled off toward the stockade. Beyond the railroad shack the lights still glowed in the DeLacey bungalow where Lynn would be up all night, ready with coffee and a hot snack for her father at the end of his job, which was over now. Harlan had an interview to hold with the two of them, a stark reality to face. The light in the station shack went out abruptly. DeLacey would be returning to his cottage.

Harlan began to walk toward it, tension mounting in him. He held the fate of Buford DeLacey in his hands and through his outburst DeLacey and Lynn knew it. He stopped for a moment in indecision and fumbled for a cigar in his tunic pocket. He got it out, drew a match along his trousers and lighted the weed. It caught and he drew in the first puff, the flame of the match hot and clear in his face. He caught the crash of the shot and felt the bullet go past his head.

He dropped fast and ripped out his gun. At the end of a building fifty yards away he caught the motion of white and leveled on it. The white blotch held steady; whoever it was there was not going to run.

"Lieutenant!" came Devery's bellow from beyond the corral where he and the troopers were moving toward the fort. "What's happened?"

Devery was up, moving fast for the white blotch. "False alarm, Sergeant!" he shouted. "Thought it was a rattlesnake in front of me. Nothing but a shadow."

Harlan covered the rest of the distance, holstering his gun. He knew what he was going to find. By the wall of the building stood Lynn DeLacey, in white shirt and riding breeches, her face without emotion in the wash of the moon. At her waist the gun was buckled.

"Well, Lynn?" he said.

"So I'm a rattlesnake?"

Her hand went to the butt of the gun and he gripped her by the wrist and pulled it away. Thrown forward, her slim body pressed against his and there was fire in its

pulsing. He tore the gun from the holster and thrust the tip of his little finger into its muzzle. It was still warm and as he drew the finger out it showed the powder spit.

"The third time, Lynn," he said. "And you missed."

"Yes. I missed."

"I don't think I have to ask any questions. You heard me tell your father, the so-called James Swayne, that I know who he is."

"I heard you, Lieutenant Harlan. Now, having spared my father long enough to get your horse train out you'll arrest him for that old killing. And hang him. It's your duty. Also it's five thousand dollars blood money for Lieutenant Harlan."

"There are no rewards for an army officer performing his job. Yes, it's my job to arrest your father. Just like it's my job to keep Tesla and his Indians from breaking out of the reservation and spreading murder all over the Border."

COLD fury gripped him. He reached out and grasped Lynn by her wrist and held it up. The Apache turquoise-set bracelet showed clear on it.

"You got this from Tesla's camp. You regard Tesla and his braves as Yankee prisoners. You call keeping them on the reservation Reconstruction in Arizona. The Apaches believe in you, you have influence over them. Out of your old hatred for every soldier in a blue uniform did you stir them up to that break-out? And are you and your father trying to goad them into a total rising?"

"Would I tell you if we were?"

She wrenched her wrist away from his grip and her clenched hand struck his jaw, almost staggering him.

"If you want your showdown you're going to get it. And I hope you get it. Here it comes."

In long, swinging strides Colonel Buford DeLacey moved from the darkened station.

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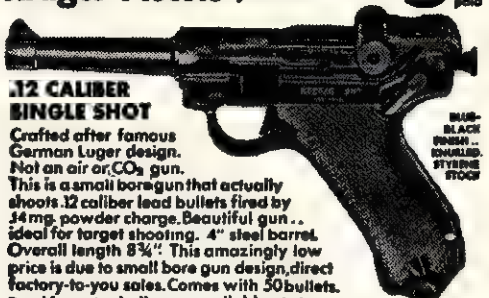

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The skirts of his long frock coat spread out in his passing and his hand was going in to his hip under them. His voice rang, harsh and deadly. "Stand where you are, Lieutenant Harlan! Lynn, go to the house!"

She was gone and Harlan turned to face a man closing in for the kill. DeLacey's hand thrust forward with the gun in it as Harlan drew his own.

"I saw you manhandle my daughter, sir! I saw her forced to defend herself against you! Now I am coming for you, you Yankee hound!"

"Come ahead, Colonel DeLacey," Harlan said savagely. There was no mercy in the aristocratic face before him, there could be none. There was already too much between Alexander Harland and the DeLacey blood.

"You are not the first Yankee officer I've killed, Lieutenant Harlan!"

DeLacey's strides were eating up the ground. From far to the east drifted back the faint hooting of the horse train. Sergeant Devery and B troop were a blur of figures nearing the fort gate. Here it was man-to-man, gun to gun, and Colonel Buford DeLacey, moving with the ease of a duelist, would be more than good with a gun. He'd be deadly. He had nothing to lose and his life and freedom to gain.

"I know," Harlan threw at him. "You're wanted for murder. So a second Yankee officer doesn't matter. They can only hang you once."

DeLacey's features worked then became a mask. "Ready, Lieutenant? At the count of five I'm going to begin my fire." His gun threw down, leveled steadily. "That is five paces from now. You may begin your fire when you are ready. One—two—three—four—" The paces counted off with clocklike regularity.

HARLAN lifted his gun and held it on DeLacey's shoulder. If his .45 slug hit where he meant it to DeLacey would be knocked flat. If DeLacey's slug hit where DeLacey meant it to he would be a dead man.

"Five!"

The spit of flame lanced from DeLacey's outpointed hand and the bullet tore the felt of Harlan's campaign hat an inch from his temple. His own gun hammer went down at his trigger squeeze. And it went down with an empty *click*. On his bureau top back there in his Bachelors' Row quarters lay the shells that he had emptied from the cylinder. He had been too long familiar with post gunshot accidents not to unload his gun when he was off duty.

"Fire, you fool! I am coming on! Are you struck by fright?"

The long legs took two more paces and DeLacey's gun, dropped from its upward recoil, held full again on Harlan, this time for a body shot. The shot crashed but not from DeLacey's hand. It came from behind Harlan, sounding above the sudden thudding of hoofs and a burst of Apache screeching. DeLacey's gun hand lifted up from Harlan. He was staring past him.

"Lynn!"

Harlan whirled. Lynn sat on horseback, the reins of a second saddled mount she had just led out of the lean-to stable shed behind the bungalow in one hand, her drawn gun in the other. Onto her, coming from nowhere, pounded a swirl of half-a-dozen Apaches on ponies, led by a bulky figure in civilian clothes. As Harlan stared, rigid with shock, the big man slammed his mount into Lynn's and tore the gun from her hand before she could fire again. It was Loki. He screeched an order in Apache and a buck in a white shirt grabbed her horse's reins and kicked it in the flank. Yelling in exultation the group pounded off over the desert along the railroad track with Lynn in their center.

"Stolen!"

DeLacey had plunged forward and reached Harlan. He raised his gun uselessly, already the range was too far for pistol shot.

"They got her!"

"Yes, Loki got her. It's all clear now."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Desert God Forgot

IT WAS all too damnably clear to Harlan's racing mind, spurred by emergency. The hidden elements in the situation he had been instinctively groping for all along had come into the open.

"Loki is no renegade Indian, serving the white men, Colonel DeLacey. He's Tesla's fighting sub-chief, who hitched up with this fort as a fugitive on a plausible story that Major Flood swallowed whole. For the last year he must have been tipping Tesla off as to campaign actions against him, so no wonder no troops have been able to get within twenty miles of Tesla.

"When Tesla lost all his horses last winter he and Loki cooked it up for Tesla to give up and come in to the reservation where the remounts were being collected. Without horses an Apache is powerless; right here to hand was the biggest collection on the Border and nothing to do but sit on the reservation and eat plenty while waiting for the chance to grab them. And then Loki met Lynn and wanted her. Do you know what his open kidnapping of Lynn means?"

"What?"

"That the big break-out has come. Tesla and his braves are off the reservation this minute waiting to ambush that horse train. Loki didn't head straight east along the butte wall for Tesla's camp taking Lynn in among the Apaches because Tesla isn't there any more. He didn't gallop due south for the Border as a lone hand because Loki isn't any lone hand; he's back into the tribe with his disguise off. He followed the railroad tracks southeast because out there somewhere he's joining Tesla and his braves lurking to hold up the train."

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"Ah!" The soft syllable said everything. "You could be right, sir."

"I know damned well I'm right because everything fits now and nothing fitted before. Loki chased those braves in the earlier break-out to the Border for a bluff. He brought back scalps that I can see now were those of two badly-wounded braves who died below the Border or on their way there. After that, he could put anything over with Major Flood but not with me. I happen to know Apaches never scalp except for personal enmity and Loki had nothing against the braves who broke out.

"Loki was in headquarters when Major Flood told me the horse train was going out tonight and he knew he had to go into action fast. Also he overheard me tell Sergeant Devery I was going into Tesla's camp. He had plenty of time to get a messenger to Tesla's camp to warn him, and have Tesla send him half-a-dozen bucks for a kidnapping job while we were loading the train. That train is running right into Tesla's ambush, getting closer to every minute."

"The ambush, I reckon, will be at Antelope Ridge where the tracks run through the blasted-out pass," said DeLacey softly. "Over twenty miles from here."

"AND B troop could never get there in time." A terrible despair gripped Harlan. "We'd not only founder our mounts but it'll be dawn soon and Tesla and Loki could see the cavalry coming from miles away and break for the Border with those stolen horses and Lynn long before we got there. In a surprise attack we'd have a chance, but how do you deliver a surprise attack over open desert? No, Colonel DeLacey, Tesla gets his horses and looses war on the Border and—" He paused and added hoarsely, "Loki gets Lynn. In the meantime there's your horse saddled and ready." He pointed to the mount Lynn had led from the lean-to stable, standing some fifty yards away with its reins hanging to the ground. "You can mount and ride for the Mexican Border and liberty any time you care to, Colonel DeLacey. My gun is not loaded and I cannot stop you. You can go ahead and shoot me before you mount. I can't prevent that either."

"I'll ride for no Border with Loki holding Lynn! I'll go after her!"

"Alone, Colonel DeLacey? It'll take a whole troop to get her out. And I told you a troop of cavalry going across the desert in full dawn would be hopeless. But—but—" Into his mind the idea came, practically full-blown as Devery and a dozen men of B Troop, brought back by the shooting, came on the double around the front of the switch engine. "Tesla wouldn't run if he saw a second locomotive coming, drawing a car loaded with forage after the horse train. He'd let it roll straight on into the ambush and trap it too. We've got the locomotive, we've got the forage car. But —" Sudden hopelessness struck him. "We haven't got an engineer."

"What do you mean, sir?" DeLacey slashed at him. "Do you think I cannot drive a locomotive? The DeLaceys are not only plantation folk, we are railroad people. I was drawn in from the field to operate the Virginia railroads for our armies. You have a plan to get my daughter out, Lieutenant Harlan?"

"I have," said Harlan. "You and I are going right into Tesla's ambush in a railroad cab."

UNDER Harlan's feet the deck of the locomotive swayed and rocked as he craned his neck out of the cab window and stared through his glasses at the desert ahead. In violent crimson-yellow the swift dawn was rushing across the sand and he felt that he was rolling into a wave of flame. Opposite him in the engineer's seat Colonel DeLacey sat with the throttle thrust to full speed ahead, his hawk-like face taut. The whole engine trembled with

power. A brawny trooper sweated at the wood-piled tender, throwing hunks of fuel through the open door of the furnace where fire roared and pulsing waves of heat blew back.

Five miles away loomed the low barrier of Antelope Ridge, running across the wasteland, and from it lifted the sign that Harlan had dreaded to see, the long pillar of black smoke rising straight up from a stalled engine. He had been right, after all.

"Smoke in the pass, Colonel DeLacey," he said. "Tesla's ambushed the train. Can we make it?"

"We are rolling under every pound of steam this engine can muster," said DeLacey harshly. "She's an old engine, badly in need of repair. If she holds together I shall get us there."

Harlan's eyes went to the pressure gauge where the needle, shoved against its limit, was bouncing back and forth.

"The gauge? Aren't we on the danger mark?"

"We have been on it for the last fifteen minutes, sir. We shall continue to stay on it. Keep chunking, fireman."

The trooper slung another billet into the furnace door and grinned.

"Safety valve clamped down an' gauge needle pointin' for halifax. I have fired an engine before on the B and O. This tin can on wheels is aimin' to blow, mister!"

"Chunk her again, fireman."

Harlan looked down the track again, feeling the sway and the shaking increase. The engine was racking even more heavily from cowcatcher to tail gate. He had done all he could, he had given his orders and DeLacey had cleared the fort in fifteen minutes flat. He hadn't reported to Major Flood what he was going to do, he had simply done it. It would have taken Major Flood half an hour, perhaps, to pull himself together and every minute was vital. The engine was pressed against a single slatted livestock car, pushing it ahead, with

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its roof edges rimmed by a solid wall of hay bales. All Tesla's lookouts could see was a lone car piled with hay and an engine following the ambushed train.

And there were Tesla's lookouts now. In his lenses distance melted and he saw the two figures on foot slide away from the rocks and dart into the mouth of the pass to take the word that another quarry was running into the trap.

"Tesla's braves have sighted us, Colonel," he called. "They've gone to warn him."

"Chunk her, fireman," said DeLacey, staring out of his cab window. "Five minutes more and we shall see plenty of Tesla's braves. It is the last stretch, Lieutenant Harlan. I shall take us into the pass at full throttle."

The ridge bulked close; belching a cloud of smoke shot with sparks the overworked locomotive rocketed on for the gap. The tracks made a slight curve at the entrance that Harlan could not see until they were on top of it and a clear view of the tracks' length was blocked. Then the walls of the ridge closed in on either side and DeLacey reversed his throttle, the driving wheels of the engine shrieking.

"We've made it. Get ready, Lieutenant Harlan. I am going to run us right into the rear of that horse train."

"I'm ready, Colonel."

Harlan swung himself out of his window and up onto the cab roof. The forage car and engine lurched sickeningly on the rails as DeLacey slowed them and the full stretch of the pass burst into view. They were running down onto the train stalled close to the eastern opening of the cutting; a mass of heaped-up boulders and loose timber jutting past the front of the horse train's engine showed the barrier that had halted it. Tesla's Apaches were everywhere, on the roofs of the cars, along the walls of the pass, wrestling the horses out of the livestock cars, forcing them to jump to ground without chutes.

On rolled the switch engine, shoving its hay-roofed car, and the Indians screeched in triumph. There must be close to two hundred of them, Harlan reckoned, and now they had plenty of rifles. Fifty yards, thirty, ten and Harlan braced for the collision. Cut down to low speed the engine and forage car crashed with only a slight shock against the rear of the train in a masterful manipulation. Over the roofs of the horse train's cars and alongside the tracks raced the Apaches, crazy for their new prey. Harlan could see Tesla erect on the roof of a far car, shouting his orders to attack.

"Okay, Sergeant Devery!" Harlan's shout was loud. "Open fire!"

UP FROM behind the wall of hay bales on the forage car the troopers rose and the volley fire of their carbines echoed blastingly in the cut. Thirty cavalrymen, who had lain hidden on the roof of the car, were in action, sweeping their lead straight down over the cars into the onrushing Apaches and along the sides of the train. Again and again the carbines crashed in trained fury, launching a sleet of lead that struck and blasted. Apache bodies fell, littering the car roofs, and went spread-eagling into mid-air off them; there was no advancing in face of the aimed gunfire that had sprung from nowhere. Tesla still stood in the distance, screaming his orders.

"Tesla! Get Tesla!" yelled Harlan.

"Gettin' him, Lieutenant!" Devery yelled back and the carbine at his big shoulder roared. Tesla went off the roof of the distant car and Harlan swung from the top of the cab as he saw him fall. Devery had the battle of the car roofs well in hand. He had his own combat job to do.

His feet struck jarringly on the engine deck and in another leap he was on the ground beside the track, running forward, Colt drawn. "Out!" he shouted as he passed the forage car. "Out and hit 'em!"

From the open side door of the car the

hidden other half of B Company jumped and charged after him. In Harlan's hand his gun recoiled again and again, firing into the Apaches crowded beside the ambushed train in the narrow, high-walled pass with a score of horses they had loosed milling and kicking among them. Arrows and rifle lead whipped over his head and past him in a storm that ebbed away raggedly as the plunging troopers' fire swept the pass. It was the same old combat technique Harlan had counted on. Caught by a surprise attack Apaches never stood their ground long, they broke and reformed at a distance. But here they had no place to go except onto the open desert, horseless.

Alongside Harlan's detachment Devery was racing his men forward on the car roofs, sweeping the top of the horse train clear of its last Apaches, shooting down onto the braves on the other side of the cars.

"Cleaned up, Lieutenant!" he bellowed from above.

"Halt!" ordered Harlan, pulling up. "Hook up your fire with ours!"

The sixty carbines of B troop, lined on the packed Apaches at fifty yards, roared in an overpowering blast at a target no trooper could miss. The heavy slugs tore through two and three red-brown bodies at a time, and behind a welter of their dead Tesla's Apaches wavered, milled and stood still, throwing down their arms and raising their hands in surrender.

"Devery, take your men over the cars and drop down in their rear! Sergeant Mack!" A hatchet-faced non-com behind Harlan stepped up. "Take this detail forward and handle the prisoners from this side."

"Yo!"

Harlan stood beside the horse train, spent with reaction from battle and long strain, hardly able to believe yet that the fight was over; in minutes of combat fury on the frontier a man could live through

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hours. With Carbine butts upraised and threatening pistols B Company was shoving the sullen Apaches into a semblance of order. He had trapped and beaten Tesla at his own game of ambush but nowhere was there a sign of Loki. Or of Lynn.

BEHIND him the whistle of the switch engine went into a crescendo of warning, tied down in one continuous hoot, and he turned and saw both Loki and Lynn. Out of the mouth of a side gut, some seventy yards away, that he had passed unnoticed on the cab, Loki had ridden with twenty mounted braves behind him and the leading brave held the reins of a horse Lynn sat with her bound hands resting on the saddle horn. A human screeching matched the screeching of the engine's whistle, the brave leading Lynn's horse broke into a fast trot and took her, rocking in her leather, up the tracks toward the western desert and Loki lifted his hand, his mouth a gaping, yelling hole.

Springing into full gallop, Loki drove for Harlan with his bucks behind him. He had held his group back in the side cutting to let the switch engine and its forage car pass and jump them from the rear. Now that Harlan had turned the tables he meant to strike Harlan with twenty furious Apaches, smash him into bloody pulp and turn and race away into the desert for the Border with Lynn.

"B Company!" shouted Harlan over his shoulder. "B Company, about face!"

"Too late, sir." Colonel Buford DeLacey had slipped through the opening between two cars beside Harlan and lined up with him, his revolver lifted in the familiar dueling posture. "I stayed in the cab to watch for something like this and tried to warn you with the whistle. The two of us will have to stand the charge."

"With what?" rasped Harlan. "You have five shells left in your gun. I've shot out all but two from mine. Those two are for Loki."

"Be sure of Loki, Lieutenant."

Harlan lifted his gun and over its sights he caught Loki's chest. Bullets tore at him from the braves riding behind Loki, eager for the kill and firing too soon from horseback. DeLacey stood like a rock beside Harlan, the cold fury of battle glinting in his face. From Loki's hand flame spit. Harlan squeezed trigger and saw cloth tear at Loki's shoulder, he squeezed again and the lead slashed Loki's shirt sleeve, inches from his heart. Dimly he was aware that DeLacey's gun had roared through its shots and that with each shot an Apache had plunged from saddle. There were too many Indians, it was all over now. Loki and his crew were abreast of the switch engine, not thirty yards away.

Clean across the width of the cutting, roaring from wall to wall, the terrific blast tore and, shocked rigid on his feet, Harlan stared into a mass of steam and hissing water through which huge hunks of metal ripped like so many deadly scythes. Loki vanished, his racing braves vanished, through the wall of steam three or four riderless horses broke, screaming in pain and rushed past Harlan. Harlan cried out himself as water in a thin, boiling rain fell onto his tunic and burned his flesh under it.

"The switch engine!" he panted.

"I blew her, sir. Not much that was hit by that blast will live."

SLOWLY the steam cleared and revealed the wreckage. There was no Loki, no spearhead of braves and horses. Torn bodies, severed arms and legs, burned Indian and horse flesh littered the earth alongside the debris of the engine. Water and a ghastly crimson spattering dripped on the cutting's walls. Here and there the survivors crouched against the rocks, all fight in them gone.

"I threw three gallon cans of firing oil from the tender into the furnace, sir, and jumped. When they went the boiler went.

All Indians fear the iron horse. I had hoped to create a diversion and it turned into total destruction."

Harlan nodded numbly. Farther down the tracks the troopers who were herding the Apache prisoners had turned and were coming back.

"Stay where you are!" called Harlan. "Send me Sergeant Devery." He shoved his shot-out gun back into its holster. "Thank you, Colonel DeLacey, for saving my skin. Whether you like it or not here's one Yankee officer who owes his life to you."

"I do not care to be reminded of that."

Harlan gave DeLacey a long stare. "Colonel DeLacey," he said. "No matter how you might hate a man you wouldn't shoot him in cold blood, only in fair fight. What were the exact facts of your killing that Union officer back in Georgia?"

"He was a vile Reconstruction scalawag whom I caught grave-robbing in the family cemetery at Tall Oaks. Some worthless freeman told him the DeLacey jewelry and valuables were buried there for safe-keeping during the war, which was true. He had half-a-dozen armed Yankee soldiers at his back, he was viciously drunk and threatened me with his pistol when I cursed him and his pack blind and ordered them off the place. So I shot the hound and the others fled and turned in a false report. In the passions and hatreds of Reconstruction I never would have had the shadow of a fair trial. So I fled to Texas and arranged the false evidence of my death. Now turn me in, Lieutenant Harlan!"

"Colonel DeLacey," said Harlan, "I believe you. Justifiable homicide. Sherman hung any soldier he caught robbing graveyards, believe it or not. Did you by any chance have a witness?"

"My daughter was close behind me. Judge Tolliver, my neighbor visiting me, was hobbling up on his cane. He, too, saw

(Continued on page 107)

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HER OUTLAW CAPTOR

By

David Crewe

WOMAN AND the love of woman brought faith and glorious idealism to the great American West, and no small measure of the stirring, history-making courage that blazoned the heroic conquest of that wild Man's Land. When the full story of that sweeping epic is told, justice will be done the memory of Sarah Everett and the hundreds of others whose hearts lent hope and the vision of right, whose hands took up men's weapons to fight when the need arose. . . .

Everett Landing on the North Fork Red was a rough, savage setting for the drama in which this slight, brown-eyed girl, still in her teens, played a man's part. Yet the spirit that had prompted her father, old T. W. Everett, to set up a trading post in the heart of the red devils' country, was her endowment. And her birthright was the welfare of that scattering of settlers who had grouped their cabins in the shadow of old "T. W.'s" agency.

Alone through the night she rode on the dim trail to Fort Sill, some forty-five miles away, across rugged, treacherous land. There she would find a doctor—and soldiers. For a two-armed ogre of death had laid siege of Everett Landing: from within, virulent, life-sapping fever gripped half the settlement; from the surrounding hills, came rumor of white renegades massing under dread Zwing Thorne.

The tall, slender figure that halted her ride was too quick for her ready saddle-gun. Her pinto reared to a sliding halt as a hand grabbed its bridle. Roughly, she was jerked from the saddle. A clutching grip at the throat of her buckskin shirt held her from sprawling to the ground

"Son," came an easy, drawling voice, "you mustn't never come clamberin' up a trail at night that way. You scare a man clear to death"

Sarah's eyes blazed, and she found her voice "Let me go!" she panted.

"Well, I'll be!" Her captor released her shirt front and caught her arm. "Don't look so wild-eyed, miss. I didn't know you was a girl."

"Now that you've found out, let me go." She fought to wrench her arm free.

"Whoa up, there, miss. You tell me why you want to go up that trail tonight, an I'll tell you why you can't. There's lots of reasons."

"You're one of Thorne's killers!" she flared.

"You knew Zwing Thorne was in these hills, an' still you rode up here at night! Miss, you got more spunk than sense. . . . Where was you goin'?"

The low, eerie call of a hoot owl sounded from back of the trail. The grip on Sarah's arm tensed. Softly, the man said, "Keep to the shadows", and then he was gone, around a rock-shoulder.

"Charley?" she heard him call. Then the answering voice—"Everythin' all right, Bill? . . . I heard a horse awhile back."

Sarah held her breath, down there in the boulder-shadowed trail. If she hopped aboard her pinto and made a run for it, maybe she could get away. . . . No, but at least she could get the rifle from her saddle holster. Then she heard Bill's laugh and his easy, joshing voice. "Go on back to sleep, Charley. Yuh was dreamin'. There wasn't no horse."

The voices ceased. Breathlessly, rifle raised, Sarah stood peering up that sliver of trail that showed at the rock-shoulder. The moon was pushing out from behind a cloud. The night had gone deathly silent. Her heart set up a furious pounding.

A twig snapped behind her. She whirled, but strong arms grabbed her. The rifle went spinning out of her hands. She looked up into the level gray eyes of the tall outlaw who had answered to the name of Bill. He gripped her two arms just below the shoulders.

"If a fella had the time to give to it, he might knock some sense into that head of yours." She was suddenly lifted, kicking and squirming, bodily off the ground. "Just for that—" Bill was saying. And then he said no more. He kissed her!

As his lips pressed hungrily against hers, resentment and anger flooded her. She fought like a catamount, her small, balled fists beating at him. Abruptly he set her down. His big hands still gripped her, but gently now. All mockery had gone from his fine, level eyes, and for a flashing in-

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stant, as her flushed face looked into his, Sarah Everett forgot the great, spanless abyss that separated her world from that of the outlaw. She forgot the danger; forgot even the death-fated Landing.

His next words brought her inexorably back. "I would do 'most anythin', miss, to pay for that—an' for just seein' you here in the moonlight. . . . You can have that big gun of yours back, but I can't let you go on to Fort Sill, if that's where you was headed. Too risky—for you."

Her whole world was reeling. It was those eyes of his, and the lean, warm strength of his body. When at last she found words, her voice was small and broken. "They need a doctor at the Landing. It's the fever. . . . And—is Zwing Thorne going to raid it? An Indian told us—"

"Thorne never yet went in for raidin' helpless settlers. They're our kind, miss. If he tried that, there'd be half a dozen of his own men ready to slit his throat."

"I'll take a chance on that, Bill," boomed a harsh voice from the brush not ten feet away. "Hold a bead on him, Charley, an' I'll take his gun. . . . Zwing Thorne speakin', lady, so watch yer hands. . . . Double cross, Bill?"

A massive, bearded figure emerged in the moonlight, sixgun drawn.

"No double cross, Thorne." Bill's voice was low and steady—and dangerous. "This is somethin' your kind don't understand, an' never would. So you're fixin' to raid a little river settlement when their fightin' men is down with the fever?"

"Bill Thurber, you've shot yer face off too much already. Too bad, huh—just as you've found yourself a woman. She's a pretty little trick, too. But you won't be around to—"

Bill leaped forward, barehanded. Thorne's gun roarerd. Sarah Everett's heart choked up in her throat as she saw Bill's body jerk half around. But his two powerful hands found their grip and held it—one bearing down on the outlaw leader's gun hand, the other clutching his throat.

Sarah swept up her rifle. The voice of Charley cut the shadows. "You an' me are keepin' out of this, ma'am." And she lowered the gun.

That hand at Thorne's throat was forcing his head back. Once Sarah saw the look on Bill's face, and she turned away. Suddenly the powder roar blared again, and sickeningly, dreading what she might see, she forced herself to look. Thorne's great body was slumping. The revolver slipped from his thick fingers as he clutched his stomach, fell heavily, lifelessly.

Bill's own gun was in his hand now. His eyes swept the brush shadows as he crouched beside the still form. "You takin' it up from here, Charley?"

Charley stepped out from a patch of brush, poking his pistol back in its holster. "Thorne brought it on himself," he said. "And I think some of the other boys'll look on that raid setup like you do."

"Bill, you're hurt!" Sarah cried.

"Nothin' but a powder burn." Gently he forced her aside, and spoke rapidly to Charley. "We got work to do feller. Ol' Doc Winthrop ought to know somethin' about fever. Reckon he'd do it. An' some of the boys may need a little explainin' to win 'em over. You with me, Charley?"

"I'm with you, son."

"Miss, you ride hell-bent back to the river an' tell 'em. I'll round up the doc back at our camp. Everythin' will be all right, miss."

And everything was all right. Bill Thurber stayed on at the Landing, to see that it was—even after the renegade doctor rode back to the lonely hills. As Bill pointed out to Sarah, "A wild buckaroo needs a partner

"And"—Sarah's lips lifted willingly to his as she reminded him—"a darn idiot girl to keep him out of trouble."

needs someone around to knock some sense into her head." ♥ ♥ ♥

(Continued from page 103)

the incident. But he agreed with me I had better run for it, a trial would end in only one verdict. They'd call him a damned Southern liar when they got him on the witness stand."

"They wouldn't today. Make your affidavit, get Judge Tolliver to make his. Sherman is still in the Army, higher up than ever; he'll kill the charge against you cold. You've done something for the Army here in this pass that the Army owes you plenty for."

"It will be good to be free of that old charge, Lieutenant Harlan."

"For a while I thought there'd be another charge. I thought you and Lynn were in with the Apaches, helping Loki stir them up. Lynn's Apache jewelry—"

"The Apaches care nothing for jewelry. I was able to pick up some excellent pieces for Lynn trading, and they were grateful for aid Lynn gave their women and children. Buy Lynn—Lynn—" A note of hopelessness crept into DeLacey's voice. "Out on the desert somewhere by now, still a prisoner."

"No," said Harlan, and in his voice was no hopelessness. There was a ringing note instead. "Around that curve, she's worked free, she's coming! Your blast turned the trick."

LYNN trotted fast along the tracks and flung herself to ground. Quick realization showed in her eyes, sweeping the wreckage and battle scene.

"My Apache guard's halfway to the Border," she said. "He just threw the reins back over my horse's neck and ran for it when that explosion came. You're all right, father? You're all right, Lieutenant Harlan?"

"Quite," said Harlan. "So Loki was Tesla's spy?"

"He bragged to me of it. He was sending those break-out Apaches back to Mexi-

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co to get the last load of rifles Tesla left cached there. He was clever, Loki."

"Around the rocks somewhere is what's left of Loki. He was too clever."

"Here's Tesla, sir." Devery's voice spoke from behind Harlan. The two men with him laid down the burden they carried in the blanket. With pain-clouded eyes Tesla stared stoically up at Harlan from the ground. His left knee was a splintered and bloody ruin where the heavy Army slug had hit. "Looks to me like that'll have to come off at the fort, sir. Tesla'll do no more riding or reservation risin'. Good old grandpa from now on."

"Yes," Said Harlan.

"Eight casualties for B, only two serious. Engineer and fireman of the horse train done for but half the corral guard escort escaped. Forted up in the car they rode in and held the Injuns off."

"Good. I'll leave it to you to clean up the backwash. Put the Apaches to work clearing the stuff they piled on the tracks, fix up the casualties and keep a stiff guard on our prisoners."

"They don't need much of a guard, Lieutenant," grinned Devery. "Where can they escape to with nothin' around but the desert? Only place they can foot it to is back to the reservation and stay there permanent. You want I should send a rider to the fort?"

"I can take care of that," said DeLacey. "Clear the track and I shall drive the locomotive to the junction with the main line, not more than twenty miles from here. It has a station shack and a telegraph. I shall telegraph the fort to send out B Company's horses and wagons for the casualties and an additional infantry guard. I can also wire for a wrecking crew and new trainmen and Department will get its horses."

"Excellent staff work, colonel," said Harlan. "Sergeant, take Tesla back and use the empty corral guard car for a temporary hospital."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall be coming along in a moment, Sergeant." said DeLacey. For long seconds his fierce eyes probed into Harlan's. "I never thought I should come to thank a Yankee officer for anything, but I thank you, Lieutenant Harlan, for getting Lynn out. That is something I can never forget. The living present must outweigh the dead past. For a brief moment we have fought side by side and I have nothing but high regard for you as a fighting man. You are the one living Yankee whose friendship I desire. There shall be no further bar of the blue uniform between us."

He held out his hand and his grip was iron-hard.

"It will be a day or so probably before I have cleared up this railroad wreckage and return to the reservation. Consider my home open to you at all times as a valued guest, Lieutenant Harlan. You will find the Spanish sherry, which I refused you before, an excellent vintage. Lynn, will you do the honors as hostess?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"For the rest of our lives my generation of the old South, whose homes you burned, will continue to hate and scorn the Yankee destroyers But your generation and Lynn's, I think, will outgrow those old wounds and hatreds The generation that comes after you will never even know them, they will be buried in history. So—I shall keep my friendships and my enmities. I regret you were not on our side in the recent war, sir. That is enough for now."

His hard grasp released Harlan's hand and he turned and strode away along the tracks, his back as stiff as a bayonet.

"We can be friends and good ones," said Harlan quietly. "He's a terrific fighting man himself. I'm glad he's stopped shooting at me. And you, Lynn, is there peace between us? Isn't three shots at me enough?"

An odd, new look was in Lynn's eyes and the shadow of a smile curved her soft lips.

"The third time I didn't shoot at you,

Lieutenant Harlan, I shot past you to warn you."

"What?"

"I saw a man with a rifle steal forward to take cover behind a barrel at the shack next to me and level on you. I couldn't fire at him, the barrel hid him; all I could see was the rifle thrusting out. It was Loki, who knew you were going after him? He drops to ground instantly. So I fired past you and you dropped. When you came up to me I was still too furious with you to care what you charged me with. That—that's over now."

"Yes," he said, "that's over now." This little spitfire of a Southern rebel who had grown into a spitfire of a woman and was a spitfire no longer was what he had been

Tesla; he told me about it. But I had no idea who it was at the time, I simply saw a killer trying to drygulch you."

"Why didn't you scream the alarm to me?"

"And have you turn and look for the person who screamed, still an upright target? What does a trained officer do when a shot cracks and the bullet goes by wanting all his lonely years of the war between the States and on the desert. He knew it and somehow he knew she knew it. "That old hatred between us is gone forever and I hope—I hope—something else is starting."

Her eyes, lifted to his, told him of new promise.

"I hope so too, Alex." ★ ★ ★

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RINGS AND THINGS

By

Bill Saxon

THE girl who lived in Nebraska one hundred years ago and murmured "I do" to the man she loved, didn't get a ring that was made out of gold. Even the cheap plated stuff was way beyond her expectations—and the reach, incidently, of the brand new groom. Consequently, wooden rings became the fashion of the times, provided each was carved by the husband-to-be. He might get one also, manufactured by the girl, her father, or her eldest brother. She wore hers all the time, but he sported his only in the course of the ceremony, then saved its newness for anniversaries and special ceremonies. Years and years later, if the couple's fortunes prospered, the unusual ornaments were replaced with conventional ones.

A lovely cake, such as was standard in the East, was out of the question in the Western wilds too. Instead the guests were glad to get plain bacon and eggs. But the servings were generous, and there just might be cubes of pork thrown in. Sweetness was provided by the flavoring, and, as a general rule, there was a choice of either maple syrup or wild bee honey.

The bride didn't wear a dress made of silk —who could afford such luxuries?—but what covered her shoulders was a real collector's item—a generation-old, elaborate lace scarf, that was worth even then the price of half a dozen acres.

But the fact that she couldn't purchase all kinds of fancy finery didn't prevent her from having an elegant trousseau. For she —and her female relatives and friends— were good at figuring out all kinds of ornamental folderols from local materials to enhance her appearance. Like impossibly wide belts made of the softest leather, and well ornamented with hundreds of shiny brass nails. If these weren't available, bits of shaped cartridge cases looked very good also. Fancy riding boots were oftentimes featured: showy affairs with sky-high heels and well decorated vamps, sides and spines, which oftentimes extended well above the ankles. Such footwear was worn with special short skirts. Otherwise how could a woman show off their ornate beauty? But the verbalized excuse was something lots more modest. Like: "You can't really ride in a long trailing gown."

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(Continued from page 73)

little disappointed, and Ross was grateful; for it meant that he had succeeded in keeping his face composed.

Dade slammed the door. "Okay, you two, out!"

Jacob and Doc were bent over Grigsby, who was stretched out on the counter. Blood was pulsing out of the side of Grigsby's neck. Doc and Jake were trying to stop it.

"A little something Austin picked up on his way across the street," Dade said. "I said for you two to move!"

Doc and Jake glanced up. "But the patient," Doc began.

"Patient, hell!" Dade said. "You'd better get out of here while you've got the chance."

Ross said, "Better go, boys."

Doc and Jake looked at him a moment. Dade was suddenly on the balls of his feet. "Don't try it! I'll kill the three of you if you try to gang me. My gun'll talk fast as hell."

Doc and Jake backed slowly from the store. Dade slammed the door behind them. He looked at Ross, laughing softly. His eyes were pinpoints of red fire. He's crazy, of course, Ross thought, with all the cunning and deviltry of the maniac.

Dade wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Well, now ain't this ducky, Sheriff! So glad you could come calling. Now tell 'em over there to saddle a couple of horses and run them to this side of the street."

"How about him?" Ross nodded at Grigsby.

"The hell with him! He'll bleed to death in another few minutes, anyway. More's the gold for me."

ROSS looked out the front window. Doc and Jake had gained the other side of the street. Nobody was making an aggressive move that Ross could see. Not with the sheriff in here with Dade.

Ross deliberately turned and walked toward the wounded man.

"The horses!" Dade snarled. "How about the horses?"

"Shoot me," Ross invited, "and you've ruined your last chance for a getaway." His gaze flicked about. Never before had he been conscious of the number of guns Jake stocked in his store. Pistols hanging by trigger guards, a case of new Winchesters. A rack of shotguns.

All empty.

There was one that wasn't. The one Jake kept on the shelf beside his cash drawer. Ross knew the pistol was there. He'd insisted that Jake keep it there because Jake worked late sometimes and was careless about locking the door.

Dade cursed as Ross moved on toward the wounded man.

Ross reached the counter. Grigsby was already dead. Ross bent over him, far over him.

He heard Dade coming up quickly behind him, ready to strike with his six-shooter. Ross' fingers groped quickly, touched Jake's gun. He spun, bringing the gun to bear.

Dade fired. The bullet ripped through the flesh of Ross' upper arm, knocked him down.

Ross looked at the face over him. Dade lost himself in wild rage. He kicked at Ross. Then he backed away, teeth bared, breathing hard to control himself. His eyes were hooded.

"On your feet, Sheriff," Dade said. "Damn you, you're still my ticket out of here!"

Ross got to his feet, conscious of the gun he'd dropped only a few feet away. But there was no chance to get it. His last chance was gone.

Then he saw the shadow on the ladder at the rear of the store.

Ellen came out of the loft with the silence of a thistle on the summer air. Ross felt

his breath stop. A man couldn't get through the vent window into the loft. But a boy could—or a slender girl. . . .

She had a gun in her hand, pointing at Dade's back. But her face worked and she couldn't pull the trigger. She spoke his name: "Dade Elswell!"

He turned; and she was able to shoot now because she wasn't shooting him in the back.

Her shot and Dade's sounded as one. His was inches high. Hers was on target. Dade doubled, dropped his gun and fell. He didn't lose consciousness but lay moaning in pain.

The door burst open and men stumbled into the store. They surrounded Dade quickly. Doc made the pronouncement that he would probably live to face a noose yet.

There was talking and excitement and men trying to look at the torn skin of Ross' arm. He brushed them aside. He was unable to look at anything except his wife's face.

It was a face of delicate beauty; but the beauty was just a pleasant mask for something far finer, an inner strength, an honesty beyond compare.

She couldn't shoot a man even of Dade's caliber in the back without giving him some kind of chance. Ross thought. A woman like that could never lie. She told me the whole truth about her and the drummer—and she came back to me of her own free will.

She was standing before him, her eyes on his face. He reached for her hand. It was rough, chapped from the lye soap. He lifted her hand, looked at it for a moment. Then he raised it and touched it with his lips.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she had to bite her lip; but her face was smiling.

He tucked her hand under his arm. And men stood aside respectfully as Sheriff Kingsley quietly and proudly escorted his wife toward their home. ★ ★ ★

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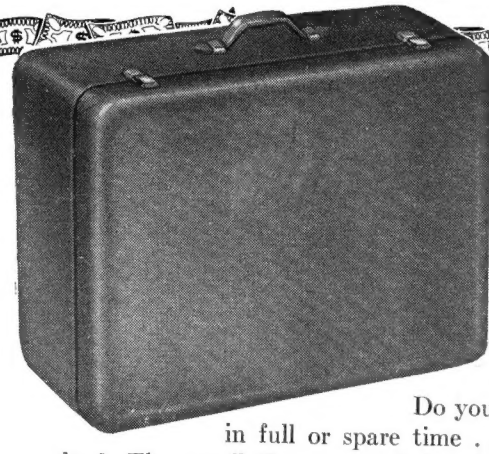

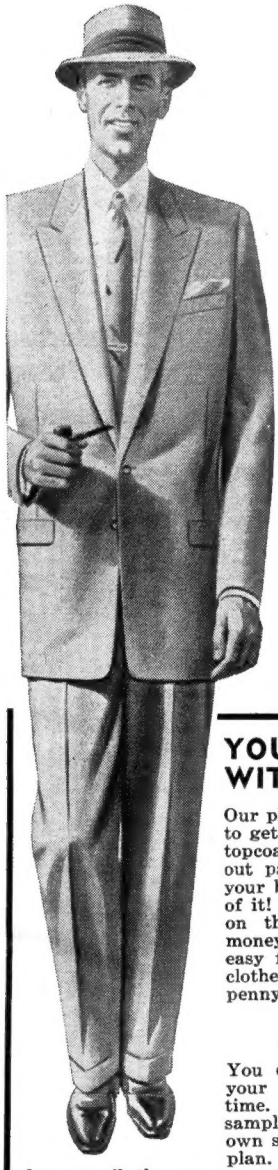

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